

The ethics of organizational change:
Part 1: issues regarding the purpose and consequences of change

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Change is more and more frequent in organizations, whether organizations are for-profit businesses, governmental organizations or NGOs, whether changes are about modifying strategies, work processes, leadership styles, HR policies or even about merging, closing down, or dramatically changing the size of the organization. Promoting change is a key job of most leaders and of a range of professionals in charge of helping them change (consultants, HR people).

My aim here is to explore the ethical issues one may face when promoting change within an organization. In my own practice and through my many encounters with other practitioners, I came to think that potential ethical issues in this type of actions are far more numerous than the ones usually covered in conventional corporate codes of conduct which mainly forbid corruption and other illegal practices.

In change processes, stakes are often high, opposing views and interests frequently prevail among stakeholders. Therefore, and probably more than in ordinary life, the change agent needs to feel what is right for him/her to do or not to do in his/her relationships with others, beyond existing legal obligations.

I will use "ethics" in this way: as a feeling we experience more or less clearly that tells us what is right for us to do or not to do and that consequently provides each of us with our own inner law. As any law, we may or may not obey it. But the fact that we may sometime ignore it does not prevent it existing.

Because there are several aspects or sub-issues to this big issue, I will write three papers.

- this one addresses the ethical issues related to the purpose and consequences of any given change
- the second one will deal with the ethical issues related to the way change is delivered, with a particular focus on issues around coercion and manipulation
- the third one will finally deal with what it takes to be ethical in the middle of practical, everyday life constraints and sometimes difficult dilemmas, i.e. with how one acknowledges and listens to this inner law.

My intention is not to tell readers what they should do. This is consistent with the assumption expressed above that ethics are felt by each person and provide him/her with an inner individual law. Therefore, I intend to consider in these papers the possible issues that may come up in organizational change processes and to understand possible attitudes people can have towards them. In doing so, I am also studying the link between ethical choices change agents make and the deep meaning of the projects, ventures, jobs they decide to carry out. The end result for the reader will be food for thought... and an unquestioned freedom of choice.

I have made use of several sources of insights. I started with my own experience as a change agent, which has now been running for some decades, and my many informal conversations with colleagues. I have also tried to read relevant works, though I did not find much on several aspects covered here. Finally, I have purposely interviewed 31 practitioners (executives and consultants) in order to study both the ethical issues they felt they had been facing in their jobs and their attitudes towards them.

The flow of this first paper is as follows. I will start with a preliminary reflection on the reasons why change in itself may be a source of ethical issues (chapter 1). I will then explain the methodology of my research through interviews of practitioners (chapter 2). This will be followed (chapter 3) by an analysis of what I got from these interviews; this analysis will be focused on the subject of this paper, i.e. ethical issues regarding the purpose and consequences of changes (topics related to other ethical issues will be presented in the next two papers). It will be presented through a map of various possible logics when trying to ethically deal with such issues. Finally (chapter 4), I will add some more comments on the philosophical roots of these logics, on the likelihood to find these logics in social change in general, beyond the organizations context, and on the way we all move among them in real life.

1. PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS: WHY CHANGE IN ITSELF CAN BE A SOURCE OF ETHICAL ISSUES

Those preliminary thoughts are based on my own experience as a change agent. I have worked for twenty years in managerial positions in various organizations, which led me to promote or take part in changes within those organizations or around them. I have then switched to a consulting role for another twenty years now, where my job has often been to help others in some respects to promote changes in their organization. This experience has been considerably enhanced by the fact that, for several years in a recent past, I have been co-directing an executive education MSc programme... on organizational change. This provided me with an exceptional range of opportunities to talk with many other brilliant change agents, whether they were participants to the programme or faculty colleagues¹. I have also read a lot about organizational change, but I must admit I did not find much on the issues covered in this paper; I probably could have found more and may consequently enrich a later version of this paper thanks to further discoveries in the literature.

Being a change agent implies promoting in some ways changes that, most of the time, not all stakeholders welcome. These changes might even be painful to some of them. They will require that these stakeholders change their behaviours, opinions, identities, sometimes careers and ways to make a living.

How does a change agent manage to be ethically comfortable with this? How does a change agent feel authorized to get people to change when they will not initially want to? This is one big question. There is also the reverse one; when should one not act

¹ Consulting and Coaching for Change, jointly run by HEC Paris and Oxford.

to change things? For what reason, when we feel we can do something to improve a situation, can we do nothing?

In other words, ethics work in both ways: what should I not do and what should I do? This duality of requirements carries an important consequence which is very relevant here. There will be a lot of situations where, whether you act or not, there will be benefits and damages. How does one then make a balance and decide which benefits are worth which damages, whatever the definitions of benefits and damages are?

I will focus here on the consequences of these big questions, hence on the change in itself.

These big questions lead us to major ethical questions: how should one behave with others? How far may one instrumentalize others? This in turn leads to key philosophical questions: what is Good? What is Right? What is our task in life? Generations of philosophers and of human beings have tried to bring answers to these questions but no unanimous and simple ones have ever been agreed on. This paper will not aim at offering the final word in the debates. It is every one's responsibility to work out one's own answers and to one's representation of what to do with one's life. The paper might simply be of some help in the reader's own reflection by describing possible ethical issues in organizational change and some possible attitudes towards them.

In this chapter, I will develop two key ideas. First, change is ambivalent: it can be ethically good or bad. This could seem obvious but is worth investigating given the current good reputation change enjoys. Second, change is often ambiguous, which means that it is often difficult to assess whether it is ethically good or not. In other words, change can be good or bad, and even when you are clear about what a good change is, it may well be difficult to see if it actually meets your criteria.

1.1. A reminder: the ambivalence of change

Change to-day generally enjoys a good reputation. It sounds smarter to tell your friends and colleagues that the professional association you belong to is named "the Change Leaders", rather than "the Status quo Defenders", or "the Keep-it-as-it-is Champions", isn't it ? Why is that so and does change deserve this honour?

The commonly positive side of change is that it is against what stagnates ; promoting change is therefore going with the flow of life and nature, the forms of which are constantly changing. As Heraclitus already long ago said: "one does not bathe twice in the same river". This old knowledge, also shared by ancient Asian philosophy, has been supported by modern science findings. Darwin explained us that species which survive are those which can adapt to a changing environment. The ability to change is a passport to survival, whether in nature or in business.

From a psychological and spiritual point of view, change can also be viewed very positively. Succeeding in life, being happy in it, requires changes. The various ages we go through are occasions or calls for change that one has to accept and honour. Wisdom is reached through acceptance of being challenged by life. Promoting change can therefore be viewed as helping people to become better persons.

Many of the sacred texts on which civilizations have been built convey this message.

The Bible tells us about mankind leaving its initial paradise, then having to go through difficulties and struggles in order to some day find paradise back, but after and thanks to having achieved an inner transformation, making it better and closer to God. The Indian Mahabarhata also tells the story of heroes being sent out of their kingdom, having to go through difficulties and struggles which transform them, then regaining their kingdom. The pattern of many of our myths (re. Joseph Campbell², Vladimir Propp³) is similar. It can be regarded as the story of a change, i.e. the transformation of a hero, that makes him/her a better person.

It is striking that some basic patterns used to-day to describe change in everyday life are similar. Just think of William Bridges's⁴ three phases of personal transformation, ending – neutral zone – new beginning, or Kurt Lewin's⁵ phases of organizational change, unfreeze- transition- refreeze.

Those are probably powerful reasons for the frequent positive connotation we give to change. Deep into the values and beliefs of many cultures, change is valued as a key to material, psychological and spiritual life and growth.

But this may be misleading because good will not necessarily result from all change. Staying in the world of myths, let's think of another well-known one: Dr Faust, as described by Goethe, also went through a serious personal change; he became able to reach a number of goals he could not reach before. For this, he sold his soul to the devil. He did not become a better person, fell into a trap that benefited the devil.

French speaking readers may remember the tale of Perrault "le Chat Botté" where a smart cat goes to an ogre who is threatening her master; the ogre can change his shape at will. The cat praises the ogre's astonishing powers and congratulates him; she asks him if he is able to change himself into something much smaller, like a mouse; the ogre does, happy to show his powers... and the cat eats him.

In both of these cases there is no positive transformation, no growth; the change is illusory, mainly serving the initiator of it. Change in this case is a tool for enhancing the power of someone and it does not lead to any development of the person who is supposed to change but rather to its regression, through some temporary ego satisfaction.

In real life, the typical example of political resistance to change, which is then called in French "la Résistance", is when a dictator or an invading army starts to deprive a people of their freedom. What they resist then is the regression that a lack of freedom would cause to them, as well as being the tool of someone else's search for more power.

In other words, as change in nature can be life or death, organization or chaos, change in people or social groups can be developmental or regressive. By developmental, I mean here, enabling people to become more autonomous, materially and psychologically, more self-conscious, more able to contribute to a peaceful and happy social life. By regressive, I mean the reverse. When it is regressive, someone may well still have some interest in it

² The hero with a thousand faces – 1949, Princeton University Press

³ Morphology of the folk tale - 1968, Austin, University of Texas Press

⁴ Transitions; Making Sense of Life's Changes – 2004, Cambridge MA, Da Capo Press Editions

⁵ Frontiers in Group Dynamics – Human Relations vol1, 1947

This fundamental ambivalence of change opens the door to ethical issues. If your ethics entail not instrumentalizing any others or some others, i.e. not using them as means to an end, without any consideration for their own interests and development (however you define this), then you need to check that the purpose of the change is in line with this principle.

Do ethics always entail such restrictions on instrumentalizing others ? I tend to say: yes in some respects. In some philosophies or religions, this restriction applies to all human beings. This is the case in the Western world (though so often ignored in practice there...); it is consistent with Christian principles; it is also strong in modern non-religious thinking (re. Kant's fundamental principle of never using others as mere means). In some other philosophies or religions, the restriction applies to some categories of people, because all people are not regarded as equal. This is why I have kept this issue as central in this paper: when you change things in a social group, you are likely to face this dilemma, and it is an ethical issue in many cultures.

1.2. The ambiguity of change

If clarifying how far you may instrumentalize others was all you need to do, it would be rather simple. The problem is that things hardly ever come across in a simple way. There are at least three reasons for this ambiguity:

- change usually brings a blend of benefits and damages to a variety of stakeholders; it is therefore not always so obvious to decide which benefits are worth which damages and for whom
- it is not so easy to decide what a benefit and a damage are
- the long term view of the consequences of the change process might lead to change the judgment on the two above points over time

Let's go through these three factors with some more explanation of each.

1.2.1. Which benefits are worth which damages ?

Damages in organizational change can be material or psychological. Material ones are typically lay-offs and people losing their job; they can also be loss of physical comfort, worsening of working conditions. Psychological ones are, in my view, as frequent and sometimes as painful; they come from the disruption in the way people give meaning to their work and sometimes to their life through their work. Some changes require a deep re-arrangement of people's strategies about this, a significant effort to shift to new skills which in itself requires a stressful change in their identity. This no easy task, because of the psychological vulnerability of the individuals. It can even be unacceptable to some, when the nature of the change leads them to what could be termed a regressive change, in reference to the views expressed above: the restriction of initiatives and creativity, lack of purpose, or of responsibilities.

Not surprisingly, the benefits will be the reverse of the damages that have just been described. A major benefit of an organizational change for people is often said to be the possibility for them to keep their job and sustain or improve their livelihood. Other benefits can be possibilities of developing new skills, initiatives, cooperation, finding more meaning in what one does.

A change process almost necessarily entails benefits and damages to people involved. However, the share of benefits and damages may not be equal among them. Some will lose more than others. Assuming that a given change is aiming at the over-arching good of the social group and of the organization, how far is it acceptable that some lose more than others, i.e. are sacrificed ? Under which conditions is this acceptable ? Can arithmetics help, i.e. is a change acceptable depending of the ratio of losers against winners ?

Is there any hierarchy among the potential benefits or damages ? For instance, are material benefits more or less important than psychological ones ? If the focus is on enhancing the common good, how can it be defined ?

1.2.2. How far are damages damages and benefits benefits ?

First, the same event can be regarded differently according to where, when and to whom it happens. For instance, losing one's job is not necessarily a bad thing. Some people are happy to take a package and leave because they have some better plans or hopes for the future. In some countries and in some periods, the job market is fluid, people, or at least some people, lose their job easily but find another one also easily. In some other countries this can be a real tragedy.

Second, and more puzzling, how can we be sure of our assessment of what, in general, is harm and what is good ? Being brought into discomfort is sometimes healthy and eventually beneficial to an individual; defeats and failures can be seeds for future victories. As Nietzsche wrote: "what does not kill, makes stronger".

In many traditions there is a God, or an aspect of God, who is associated with destruction, death, war, limitations and constraints: e.g. Kali and Shiva in Indian tradition, Saturn and Mars in the Greek-Roman mythology.

Conversely, helping someone might seem doing good to him but, who knows, perhaps this will not be as beneficial as it seems, because the future is unpredictable, because some good on one level (e.g. material condition) may not be as good in another one (e.g. psychological condition)...

1.2.3. The longer view may change the judgment

Moreover, the assessment of benefits and damages may evolve over time, while consequences of a change process gradually unfold.

This was illustrated by a real life example which was reported by one of my colleagues, Myriam Campinos-Dubernet⁶. It is not a once-in-a-lifetime event; when I shared it with colleagues, some told me they had similar examples in mind.

In a chemical plant of the multinational company X1, a plant manager had developed an outstanding TQM⁷ policy, successfully involving operators. He and his deputy strongly believed in it, and acted accordingly. Operators, within each team, became more polyvalent and responsible; the productivity went up. Whereas a team was

⁶ for an in depth study of the case, see: Campinos-Dubernet M. - Systèmes qualité et amélioration des processus : savoirs, organisations, marchés – Rapport établi pour la DARES, Ministère des Affaires Sociales, du Travail et de la Solidarité, France – GIP Mutations des Industries et des Services, Noisy le Grand, 2003.

⁷ Total Quality Management; a method of continuously improving quality through empowering workers and helping them set up and run more efficient work processes

normally made of 5 people, they eventually could do the job with 4 when one was absent, or could do more work than the usual rate when there was a peak of demand. They did it because they became really involved, trusted their leaders and were ready to walk the extra mile when needed; they consequently let go one of the classical protections operators use: keeping for themselves what they know about possible productivity gains.

Then, the plant manager retired; his deputy took another job in the company. The new plant manager did not share the same mindset; moreover he got pressure from the headquarters to save costs because of a downturn of the market. It was easy for the new plant manager and his team to decide that teams would now be made of 4 people. Some operators lost their jobs. No need to explain how these operators will consider any new attempts to empower them...

This example is an illustration of the idea that benefits and damages of a change cannot be fully appreciated on a short term basis... and that the medium or long-term horizon often lies in the mist. The span of time during which a leader can control the parameters that make a change beneficial is limited and, quite often, unknown.

As a summary of this chapter, change per se is a source of ethical issues; the following are questions a change agent is about to face more or less explicitly and consciously:

Questions regarding ethical principles:

- do I allow myself to instrumentalize others ? If yes, whom and under which conditions ?
- If I do not allow myself, in principle, to instrumentalize others, do I nevertheless accept an indirect instrumentalization, i.e. that the common or greater good should be searched for at the cost of some people's disadvantage or suffering ? Under which conditions ?
- How do I define what is beneficial or detrimental to an individual or to a social group ?

Questions regarding how ethical principles are applied in a given situation:

- Does the purpose of the change entail instrumentalizing some stakeholders in order to benefit others ? If yes, am I ok with it ?
- If some stakeholders are experiencing what I regard as losses or discomfort of some kind, is the change nevertheless worth achieving?
- For which period of time in the future can I assess that change will be beneficial ? What are the risks for people involved beyond this period ?

2. THE RESEARCH I DID

I decided to interview practitioners in order to understand how they saw their ethical issues in their jobs of change agents.

Through this set of interviews, I wanted to reach a panorama of possible ethical issues in organizational change and of the possible attitudes towards them which would be as comprehensive as possible.

For this, I chose interviewees that I knew; I wanted to avoid meeting people who would not mind about ethics, who would display some hypocritical discourse or would be cynical about it. I rather wanted to talk to people concerned with ethics and I had the feeling that those ones were. They were 31 persons. The majority of them was composed of those participants of the September 2009 meeting of “the Change Leaders” (CCC alumni association⁸) who accepted my proposition of talking with them on the matter. Another group in the sample was made of other professionals in my network. I know that this way of building my sample cannot reach any statistical significance, but my aim was not to give a picture of a given population. It was to make an inventory of possible worldviews and logics.

Was my choice of interviewees appropriate for this ? At least, it let me make significant progress. I could talk to a wide variety of people, all of them being experienced practitioners. Approximately two thirds of them were consultants and one third executives. There was an almost equal number of men and women; 9 nationalities were represented. However, this led me to mainly interview people from Western cultures. So, it would be wise to consider the following as a Western perspective, even if several of the interviewees had a significant experience of working in various parts of the world. Another limitation in the variety of my sample is that interviewees mainly came from the business world, a few of them being consultants to the public sector. But I did not talk to social workers, musicians, monks, trade unionists...

Interviews took place between 2009 fall and 2010 spring. They were semi-structured interviews, starting with very open questions and ending with more precise ones, or even with sharing some of my hypotheses. The key points I sought to cover were:

- the issues I have described in the previous section: what dilemmas or ethical difficulties they face in their change agent job and what makes the changes they promote ethically acceptable to them.
- issues related to the delivery of change process, with a special focus on coercion and manipulation
- possible dilemmas or difficulties they may experience to remain ethical under the pressure of every day business life and ways they have found to cope with them.

This went well. Most of the interviews lasted one hour to one-and-a-half hours with a few exceptions (4) which lasted less and were focused on a few issues. Only 6 were done by phone; the rest was almost equally done face-to-face or via Skype video-conferencing. Given the good level of trust with my interviewees, they were very open and willing to contribute. All in all, I felt the level of depth we reached in these

⁸ Consulting and Coaching for Change, an Executive Masters Programme, jointly run by HEC Paris and Oxford University – Saïd Business School.

interviews was satisfactory. Of course, I may have been misled by my good relationships with the interviewees. I am also aware of a basic limitation of this kind of interviews. We may sometimes, even very honestly, confuse our “theory in use” (i.e. along which we actually act) with our “espoused theory” (i.e. the one we think we believe in), in Chris Argyris’s⁹ terms. Though these conversations were often based on examples which interviewees experienced, this does not fully mitigate this intrinsic weakness of interviews as sources of data. As said, earlier, my aim was not to describe the reality of what people do or think; however, going more in depth than I could do into some of their experience may also have brought additional insights.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS: A PANORAMA OF POSSIBLE ETHICAL ISSUES AND OF LOGICS IN DEALING WITH THEM

In this chapter, I will give an account of what interviewees told me regarding ethical issues they faced which were linked with the changes they are promoting, their purpose and consequences; as said earlier, I will report what they told me on other issues in the next papers. I will first present here two more dilemmas, which some of my interviewees mentioned to me and which I have not mentioned in the above preliminary thoughts. Then I will present a map, based on my interviews, of possible logics people may follow when dealing with the ethical issues we considered in this paper.

3.1. Some more ethical dilemmas

With no surprise, the issue of possible damages in a change was a widespread concern among interviewees. They generally confirmed the type of ethical issues I analysed earlier in this paper, though often with less depth of analysis, insisting more on some of them than on others.

This confirmed the relevance of the questions I summarized at the end of chapter 1 earlier in this paper and which focus on instrumentalization of others, be it on purpose or indirectly to the search for some greater good.

But I was also told of two more dilemmas, which actually do not apply only to change processes.

3.1.1 Does culture matter?... Or the question of relativism

The first one is very general and pertains to any relationship with other human beings.

A local Asian executive of a western multinational was found guilty of some corruption. He was considered as a good performer. In Western ethical terms, he should be out. But, in his culture, what he did is not regarded as badly as it is in the

⁹ Argyris C. & Schon D. (1974). Theory in practice: increasing professional effectiveness – San Francisco, Jossey Bass

West. He could even argue that, in order to make the numbers (or the change) he is asked to make, he needs to do some kind of corruption.

This type of situation is not uncommon. There are two kinds of dilemmas here. One is not a pure ethical dilemma. If you claim that your ethical principles forbid you to corrupt people and if you want to do business in some countries, you have a problem. But this is a choice between doing what you know is ethical and what you know will bring you more concrete benefits, at least in the short term. We will not deal with this kind of dilemma here; we'll do in the third paper. The second dilemma is indeed a purely ethical one: whatever you decide, it can be a problem in ethical terms. To which code of ethics are you going to refer? Your code, which this person has not internalized, or his code? This links to a major ethical and philosophical issues: should we be relativists, e.g. accept that ethical codes are culture-dependent or should we seek for universal ones?

3.1.2 Does what happened before matter?... Or the question of the breadth of responsibility

The second one is also more general and addresses the issue of the responsibility of individuals over what their organization has done in the past.

A company has been successfully working along a business model and a leadership style for many years. Then, the world around is changing, a new business model, a new leadership style are required. Quite often, a population of middle-managers who have contributed to the past success of the company become obsolete and/or have great difficulties to shift to the new skills and mindsets that are required. Moreover, as one HR Officer said, "we have created bonds with them". There are two options: one is to ignore the past, particularly if you are new in the company. You get rid of them, of course possibly with a fair treatment. The other is to acknowledge some responsibility of the company in the bond that has been created, and that ensured past profits. This other option may eventually end up with some redundancies as in the first option but at higher costs and after having tried harder several other possibilities.

One aspect of the question here is: how far does one take responsibility of the past in an organization, particularly when one was not there before. Is there such a thing as "the company" which can have moral debts from the past and for which you become responsible when you become the CEO? Or are there nothing more than individuals working together at a given time, which suggests that you are not more morally responsible of past periods than you are of what happened in your house when the former owner lived in it?

In the next section, I will not study in detail the attitudes of my interviewees regarding those two above issues, though I will report what I could get; the reason is that only a few of my interviewees mentioned them to me. Once I had been told by one, I could have asked the next interviewees what they would think or do about them; I did not systematically because I felt they were not a typical change issue but a more general

one, and I preferred to use the limited interviewing time for what I considered as my core target.

3.2. Possible logics regarding ethics in organizational change: a tentative map

My assumption here is that there is a logical link between the way people look at ethics and deal with ethical issues, the way they justify their legitimacy as a change agent, and their style in this job (i.e. the types of changes and change strategy they choose or prefer to work at). What I call logic in this context is this coherent system of values, beliefs and practices. This assumption was widely confirmed in my interviews; though people may be somewhat inconsistent they cannot live and succeed without some consistency. So I do not mean that all were fully consistent in all respects. They were at least consistent enough to let me understand and describe logics. In other more sociological words, I have tried to map ideal-types, in Weber's sense, i.e. phenomena that hardly ever exist exactly as such in the real world but that help describe, understand and explain it.

So what follows will not just be a flat description of what my interviewees told me but also an elaboration of mine which I hope did not distort what they told me, but which adds:

- a logical link between various pieces they told me (attitudes towards ethical issues, own legitimacy, type of practice); this link was not always explicit in my interviews
- a distinction between attitudes and logics based on various stances regarding two basic philosophical question, which are listed below. Here again, most of my interviewees did not address them explicitly, which implies that I have made some interpretations.

The two questions are :

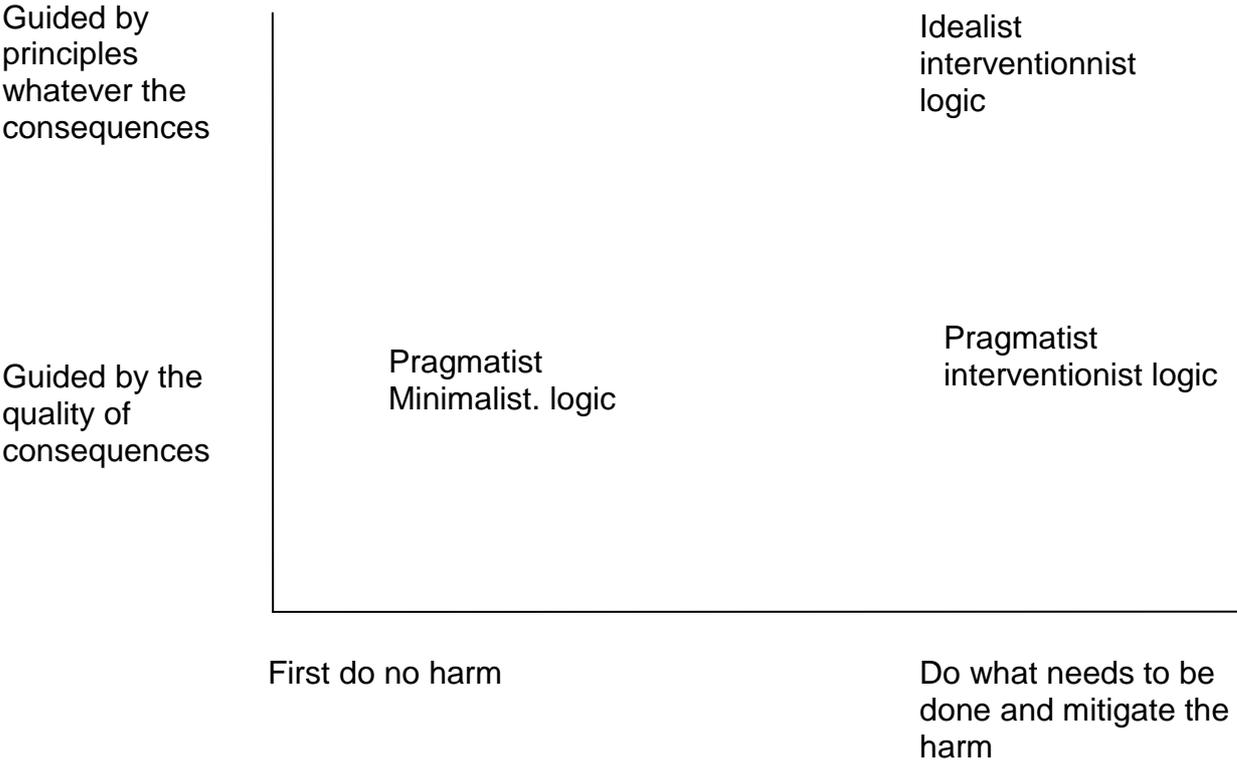
- Do I act according to principles, whatever the consequences? Or do I act according to expected consequences of my action and to their contribution to what can be considered to be a better situation in ethical terms ?
- How far can I or should I intervene in the social world ? How far does the risk of damages for not doing things exceed the risk of damages for doing them ?

I did not ask these questions explicitly because they appeared to me when analysing my interview notes. Had I done it anyway, I am not sure every one would have had a ready, well-thought-out answer; I would suspect most of us do not have it at hand and it is through interpretation of what one does and of how one justifies it that one can most often reach it...

My possible misinterpretation of what one particular interviewee told me does not matter much because I do not intend to give numbers, or percentages of people belonging to the various areas in the map. I am just trying to identify logics.

Matching answers to those two basic questions leads to the following map and to three main logics. One could expect that a 2*2 diagram yields four logics; in theory, it could, of course. In practice, I only met three in my interviews but I'll say a word on the fourth one further in the next chapter.

The fact that I am mapping logics means that I am not mapping people. Some interviewees and readers may feel well described by one of the logics, some others may feel they sometimes follow one logic and sometimes another one, and still some others will feel they use a bit of this one and a bit of this other one at the same time. This is the benefit of ideal-types to provide some landmarks in a chaotic and messy reality...



Let’s go through each of these logics. For each of them, I’ll describe, the attitude of the change agents following this logic towards the ethical issues mentioned above, with a special focus on those mentioned in chapter 1, the job they do as change agents, the possible variants in these respects, the way they justify their own legitimacy to do it and the possible challenges and traps of the logic.

3.2.1 The pragmatist minimalist logic

The pragmatist minimalist logic joins the “primum non nocere” (“first, do no harm”), Hippocrates’s principle. It will not take sides. It will not try to reach any given outcome because one of the key point in this logic is that the change agent does not know what is good for the people involved. However, the change agent will take a role in a change process. But this will only be to help the people involved reach a result that they will all feel acceptable. The quality

of the change agent's work will be judged by the quality of the outcome of the social interactions he/she will have facilitated.

Therefore, back to the key questions I mentioned at the end of chapter 1, he/she will minimize the risk of being harmful, of instrumentalizing people or of helping some stakeholders to do so. Therefore he/she can escape possible ethical issues in their action if the process they design and facilitate actually ensures that each stakeholder can contribute positively to a solution while being respected by the others.

This also applies to the additional issues of relativism and culture, and of the breadth of responsibility including or not the past moral debts of the organization.

The jobs that are compatible

This logic is therefore the one of consultants and coaches who choose to position themselves as facilitators, mediators, designers of debates and conversations between stakeholders.

"I do not work on programmatic changes, it saves ethical problems".

This logic can be sustained if one accepts two kinds of limitations regarding the selection of jobs one can do.

First, change agents in this logic will more easily keep to it when acting on small groups (the top management team of big company being a small group). When it comes to involve hundreds or thousands of people, having each stakeholder being part of the decision process, avoiding the risk of damages to some of them, becomes much more difficult to achieve, though probably not impossible.

Second, they will only be able to work in organizations where the leader and his close team will accept to release part of their formal authority and take the risk of open dialogues.

Each time one of those limitations is ignored, not only their efficiency but also their ethical integrity will be threatened.

A few variants

I could identify variants of this first "low damages risk" attitude.

I got the typical Palo Alto¹⁰ one;

"I do not look for fundamental changes within people, just for a way for them to act differently in some situations. I do not risk to generate problems."

"Is it right for the client and his ecosystem (i.e. people he is dealing with)? If the solution is not right for the stakeholders involved, it will not work... I have no preference for a particular solution."

What do those people tell us? They do not dig into the deep psychology of the person or of the group they work with, which they feel can be harmful; they try to help them find a way to act differently in some situations and they let them decide

¹⁰ The Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto (California) has given birth to a number of approaches to psychotherapy and social intervention which include family therapy, brief therapy, interactional/systemic interventions.

about it. They do not know what would be best, they take care not to believe they know and not to want any precise outcome to happen.

I also encountered another variant, which would not borrow, at least consciously, from any particular psychological school; it is the attitude of consultants who mainly consider that their job is to do two things:

- help people reflect on issues they face
- help people talk with each other about it, craft good conversations

“I help people to reflect. Perhaps I will give a few orientations but I will let them free of deciding what they will do”.

There are other variants, stemming from other psychological streams. I will comment on this in the additional thoughts of the next chapter.

The change agent's legitimacy

In this position, the legitimacy of the change agent is not a big issue, since he/she is not enforcing or promoting any particular outcome. His/her legitimacy only pertains to his/her ability to design and facilitate appropriate processes and is derived from the fact that he/she has been trained for it, has sufficiently worked on him/herself to significantly take care of his/her possible unconscious projections.

Challenges and traps

Is this attitude totally risk free, regarding the possible damages and instrumentalizations in a change process ?

Perhaps not, but it gives at least some comfort to those who adopt it and it certainly reduces the number of difficult situations.

As one of my interviewees says it, the trap is to be caught by the passions of stakeholders and therefore to step into the arena.

“My responsibility is to help people reflect. The ethical mistake is projecting one's own ideas, putting oneself in the shoes of the other.”

On the other hand, two other challenging questions can be addressed to people following this logic; first, what if taking sides in the situations they work in would yield better outcomes ? Second, as a probable answer would be that they do not know what is best, another question would be: how are you sure the people involved know better than you ?

These are certainly what followers of the next two logics would object to this one...

3.2.2 The pragmatist interventionist logic

We now move to the lower right quadrant of the map and we step into a totally different universe.

In this logic, the change agent takes sides. He/she is taking part in the battle and promotes a change; in the former logic, change in a social system was a consequence; in this one, it is first an intent.

Therefore change agents in this logic will face all the ethical issues we have seen so far. This is probably why the description of this logic will use up more pages in this paper.

They will need to take care that no raw instrumentalization of one party over the others is taking place and that the change is indeed for the greater good.

"I try to equally bring value to employees, clients and shareholders. Everybody wins. So far, my bosses have always let me take care of the three thirds."

"When I feel I am instrumentalized to do something that is highly destructive, or it is about share price jiggling, I do not go."

"You need to find out why they hire you, what the job really is, find out who you are dancing with. There are more and more ambiguous hiring situations."

"Do you accept what your sponsor tells you about the change ? How far have you researched yourself ? It is the change agent's responsibility to make sure he is not being used for an ulterior purpose that he may disagree with."

"I consider myself as an extension/ adjunct of the role of leadership; but I need to agree on the purpose of the change; the purpose is bigger than the relationship with the client, it is superior to the client itself."

Consequently, instead of "first do no harm", the guideline will be "do as little harm and as fairly as possible while doing a greater good". In other words, as a French proverb says it: "on ne fait pas d'omelette sans casser des oeufs" ("you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs"). This means that change agents here will be concerned about the possible damages of a given change and that, before engaging into it and while in its process, they will assess that the benefits for a greater good are worth the damages. They will try to mitigate those damages as much as possible, seek for a fair share of damages when possible and a fair compensation of damages to those suffering from it.

"The first hurdle (to assess the legitimacy of a change) is the greater good; if not, why are you doing it ?"

"People often do not see that, if they don't change their business, the pain will be much bigger later. Quite often, what we propose will make a few people worse off, but common good will be preserved"

"If people (employees) do not start moving they will be ejected anyway"

"My responsibility is to be aware of secondary effects at least, and, even better, to work at mitigating them"

The jobs that are compatible

People following this logic can be CEOs and executives who are by definition involved stakeholders in a change. Understandably, it would be difficult for CEOs to

follow the minimalist logic in their role; so, they have to be interventionists. Since CEOs are nowadays assessed through the results they yield, it is no surprise that they often are also pragmatists, in the sense used in my map, i.e. they assess the ethical acceptability of their actions through their results. This consequently applies to the people working for them, as insiders (e.g. HR executives) but possibly also as consultants.

It is here that one will typically find the consultants who are ready or happy to work on clearly top down change projects, where they are explicitly advising and assisting the top management. If they choose less directive, more participative change processes, this will be because they will find it more efficient. We also find most business consultants (strategy, IT, communication) in so far as part of their job reaches the internal change issues.

In my group of interviewees, I had a number of people following more or less exactly this logic. This is no surprise since the major shares of the change and business consulting markets are there. Let's recall that we are considering people who are concerned with ethics here; one can be pragmatist without much concern for ethics in those jobs but this is not their case; the logic that is described here enables those who follow it to do those jobs with a feeling of being ethical, as it stands in their own worldview.

A few variants

Now, what is this greater good? Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot¹¹ have offered a taxonomy of "worlds of justification" applied to arguments and claims for justice in case of disputes. Though this was not designed to be applied in our case, it can be because it describes ways to justify that an action is right or fair, or is not. They identify six of those worlds, expressed by the work of six thinkers: civic (Rousseau), market (Adam Smith), industrial (Saint-Simon), domestic (Bossuet), inspiration (Augustine), and fame (Hobbes). One can probably argue and find a seventh or an eighth one but this is not the issue here. This notion of "world of justification" is interesting because it shows how social groups build visions of what the world should be, and of the right behaviour of its members. The problem is that what seems legitimate, obvious and undiscussable in one of those worlds is not so in another one.

- the business variants (hard and soft)

It was striking but after all not surprising that the most common attitude among my interviewees was inspired by what Boltanski & Thévenot call the "market" and the "industrial" worlds of justification. This links back to one of the limitations of this paper I mentioned above, i.e. the range of jobs of the people interviewed.

In this world of justification, our market-based capitalism is regarded as good or acceptable. Working for the profits of a business is the major task, because it will keep it alive and hence save jobs and keep the economy going.

In the first chapter, I raised the question of a possible hierarchy among possible benefits or damages, namely between material and psychological ones. The hierarchy here is clear and it gives priority to material benefits.

"If the company is at risk, almost any change is worth it"

¹¹ De la justification, les économies de la grandeur – Paris, NRF, 1989; On Justification: Economies of Worth, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006.

"I look at how the change is going to support the business. Is it a well thought out strategy ? Will it help the company being successful ?"

"I always work, 1 for the business, 2 for the people."

"I am a strong believer in the merits of capitalism. Redundancy programmes can be right. We need a healthy business."

I sometimes got the "hard" version of it, from some of my American interviewees. In this version, the least you hinder market forces, and in particular financial markets, the better, whatever the damages, because it will eventually bring the best result for all. In that case, only dishonest practices are regarded as unethical; they are, by the way, detrimental to the market system itself. Employment contract is mainly a contract as any other in a market.

"In a company, people are free to leave if they do not like it. The CEO decides and it is legitimate unless he is doing unethical things (e.g. Enron)."

"When there is resistance, quite often it is because people have forgotten the contract between them and the company; they can always choose to leave."

I had more often a softer, more "European", version with a search for a balance between a fair share of benefits and damages in a given situation between all stakeholders, and, particularly between workers and shareholders

"There is a correct profit for a business. Over this profit, additional ones are made on the backs of people."

"The key is the mid-term success of the organization i.e. which is good of all stakeholders."

"Change is not legitimate if the good of the Company is unfair to the workers. I have to assess this and leave if this is not ok."

"What do we do with managers that do not fit with the new culture ? E.g. aggressive, short term, result oriented guys. We have created dependency, they have worked for us for 25 years ... X sees no problem. He is from the US culture of employment at will. I see one; I try to make sure we explore all solutions before making them redundant."

This is probably in this soft version that people will more easily accept to take on past moral debts of the organization towards its employees whereas the hard version rather leads not to take it into account.

- the civil servant variant

Not surprisingly either, I had some of the "civic" world when talking with consultants mainly working for the public sector. There, we find again the principle of working for

the greater good but its legitimacy is reinforced by the fact that the public sector is supposed to be working for the good of the society and that this good is decided by people who have been elected. Of course, this is also a matter of how one looks at things. Elected politicians sometimes serve their own interest and their re-election chances, or the interests of their party, or of allied groups.... Hence, here again, consultants needs to be careful about what they are really serving.

“Working for the public sector gives more meaning. It’s working for the community.”

“I work for the public sector and NGOs. They have a mandate of providing service to the community. I have a moral obligation to show when they do not comply with their mission (e.g. we use users survey).”

“I am paid by representatives of communities, working for the common good. They apply a strategy that has a democratic legitimacy. I never had problem of politicians not really working for the common good.”

“We have long term relationships with some officers who commission us. We need to remain sufficiently independent from them, not necessarily support their views.”

“Sometimes it is easy: if they do not change, they disappear. Sometimes “better” is subjective. But I do not make the key choices; people vote for those who commission me.”

On the legitimacy of the change agent

Interventionnists need to justify another thing: their own legitimacy as a leader, or as a helper to the leader. Who are they to think they are entitled to change the world, or at least some part of it?

Most frequently, my conversations very precisely confirmed what Max Weber¹² wrote in the early XXth century: according to him the prevailing source of legitimacy of authority in the modern era was going to be what he called the rational-legal legitimacy, which entailed two ingredients: number one: the leader is legally appointed, by virtue of an election or by nomination by someone who has been elected, or by the legal owner of a firm. Number two: this person is chosen because of his/her rationally assessed competence to do the job. This is exactly what people were telling me, some insisting more on one of the points and some on the others. I was impressed by Weber’s genius: he could identify a major and lasting trend of our societies, which was confirmed so accurately some hundred years after him by my interviewees who, in many cases, had not read him.

Number one: “ this my job, this why I have been legally appointed”

“I work on a programme that has been decided by the company’s top management

“I am hired by someone who has decided and is entitled to do it”

¹² In English: Basic concepts in sociology – 1962, NY, Citadel Press

Number two: “ I know better”

“I saw the change as the greater good. ... Looking back, there was no other way”

“My legitimacy is that I have a talent to foresee 5 years ahead the challenges and evolution of the business”

“As an outside observer, one can see better the whole system”

“I have studied and have a professional qualification + my experience. I have more sets of lenses than practitioners, I can use more of them. If you cannot think differently, you do not add value. This gives me legitimacy to form my own judgment, beyond what the leader says”

“We devote ourselves to continuous learning and development of our competency”

Challenges and traps

The vulnerability of this logic is that it relies on the belief of serving the greater good and of knowing better about it. Since, this greater good is often difficult to define, subject to discussions and disagreement among stakeholders, this may weaken the pillar which supports the logic. This is enhanced by the fact that the change agent has taken sides and may be biased in his/her assessment of what this greater good is.

The same applies to the assessment of what is beneficial or not to stakeholders. We have seen that this is also often hard to define. One can be therefore tempted to intellectually minimize the harm in change is doing and overestimate the benefits. The key challenging question to this logic is: are you sure you really know ?

3.2.3 The idealist interventionist logic

Moving to the upper right quadrant of the map, we now reach a universe which shares a lot with the former one but differs on one key aspect.

What is common with the former is the fact that this logic takes sides. People who follow it are in the battlefield. What is different from the former one is that, regarding possible damages to some stakeholders, the justification will not be about a greater good that can be computed in looking at who or how many will eventually be better or worse off, as in the previous logic. The greater good in a social group is here seen as the fact that some key values are respected and applied, such as respect for individuals, concern for their development, equal treatment of all...I am mentioning those values because they were those my interviewees insisted on; however, this logic can be followed by any social activist with possibly other values.

Of course, in the former logics, values were also served since we are only dealing here with people who are supposed to be concerned with ethics in their practice, but those values were used to assess whether the outcome of a change process would be ethically acceptable. In this new logic, the change agent will be concerned by the fact that what he/she is doing here and now is in line with his/her core values, whatever the later consequences may be. Consequently, people talking from this

logic will often talk about what they feel is their duty to act. The higher ethical risk would be failing to do one's duty.

Back to the questions raised in chapter 1, this means that this logic will also of course take care of avoiding any purposeful instrumentalization of people in a change process in so far as this is part of the ethical principles that are followed.

I got less of this logic in my interviews, which explains that I will give less quotations from the interviews. In the next pages.

A few variants

One way of justifying a change is that it is a fight for values. When helping the organization, it is not so much about helping the business but the social group and what takes place in it in terms of human development. In both logics, this one or the one I have reviewed above, the business side and the social side are present. But, in the previous world, business was at the foreground and the social side in the background. In this other case, background and foreground are reversed.

"I fight for values. I fight for the respect of individuals. Change is sometimes a fight against the system regarding respect of people."

Another way of applying this logic is less ambitious. It is not really about spreading the values but, more modestly, to be personally consistent with them in a world that is not. In other words, the business world today is seen as often unethical. But one has to live in it. In other words there is a fundamental doubt about the "greater good" in business. However, one can make a difference in being ethical; there is room for it. At least, in the area where one acts, it is possible to establish adult relationships, based on truth and trust, search for fairness, keeping to one's word, concern for win-win agreements. This will not change the fact that business can be unethical but one can do it and even, one should do it. The focus is on the how more than on the what.

HR is a potentially dirty job. If you are ethical in it, you can make a difference for people. For instance, firing people: there is room for ethics in the way you do it.

The jobs that are compatible

In this logic, the change agent will obviously need to carefully choose the battles he/she will fight. In principle, this can lead him/her to all the jobs that are accessed by followers of the previous one but the range of change contents or of organizations will be more limited. In terms of change contents, if the key values are, for instance, democracy and employee involvement, a consultant will only work on change projects that include employees empowerment, improvement of dialogue inside the organisation; a CEO will only chose jobs were he/she will be able to develop such policies. Some consultants or executives will only work for social businesses or NGOs. Civil servants or consultants working for them can be in that case if their choice is grounded on values.

On the legitimacy of the change agent

I am legitimate by virtue of my personal responsibility, of my duty and of the rights of human beings.

Exemplarity is certainly a contribution to legitimacy

In this logic, change agents do not need to talk at length of their competence. It is of course needed, but the main key to legitimacy is not there. In their view, anyone is legitimate to stand up and support key values. Anyone, provided this person is genuinely living them. As Gandhi is reported to have once said: *“Be the change you want to see happen in the world”...*

Challenges and traps

Therefore, the challenge is to live by the values. The danger however is fanaticism: it is not big as long as the change agent only takes care to live by his/her values in his/her own behaviour. It becomes bigger when he/she supports a change which implies that members of the organization will have to change their own behaviour according to those values. Giving oneself the right to make the social world what one would like it to be, in the name of superior values, requires a high wisdom; otherwise the door is wide open to all excesses. The key challenging question to this logic will then be: are you sure you are serving your values, and not your own projections and desires of power ?

4. SOME ADDITIONAL COMMENTS: FROM A MAP TO REAL LIFE

I will add two main comments.

First, I would like to show how the logics I have described relate to everlasting debates on ethics and that, therefore, they can be relevant to social change, beyond the limited sphere of organizations.

Second, I will try to connect the map presented above, simple and well ordered, with the more complicated and messier real life.

4.1. On some basic roots of the logics I described

These three logics do not appear by chance. For long, and probably in many societies, they have been present. It is not surprising that the two dimensions which I used to distinguish them have long been key issues in the philosophical literature on ethics. In particular, the pragmatic/idealist dimension is an illustration of a key differentiator between two major streams in ethics, often named consequentialism (judging behaviours through their consequences) and deontologism (judging behaviours through their conformity to duty).

A whole book could probably be written on the various arguments and positions philosophers have offered in these debates and I will not pretend to do it. I will simply

mention some of them, as landmarks which well illustrate the various logics and show how they relate to deep philosophical stances.

By doing this, it is possible to populate the upper left quadrant of the map, which was left empty after my interviews. This would be a logic of minimal or non intervention, based on values. In its extreme version, this is very well illustrated by Lao-Tseu. For him, the wise man does not act, does not want anything, and harmony takes place around him: *“The saint does not act and teaches without a word; all things in the world come up without his doing”... “Tao does not act by itself; though, every thing happens through it. If princes and lords could adhere to it, all beings in the world would transform themselves”*¹³.

It is no surprise that I did not meet anyone in our modern society which illustrated this view. For it, I should have looked for some remote hermit and there was none in my sample... Nevertheless, it is worth noting that this stance is possible. It belongs to the family, even if it is today some kind of hidden sibling. Because it is so different from the other logics which most of us follow, it must not be forgotten, it is worth keeping in mind as an option and a question to any change agent...

If we move to the upper right quadrant, the idealist interventionist, we find equally famous philosophers. Plato wished that rulers of society were philosophers, i.e. wise people who would be able to govern along high values. I mentioned Kant earlier in this paper. He precisely defended the idea that ethics were non negotiable. What he termed his “categorical imperative”, i.e. ethical principle, had to be followed whatever circumstances and possible consequences. One of my interviewees mentioned Emmanuel Levinas, a contemporary French philosopher. In short, his message is: I am responsible for the other, including of the fact that this other is responsible of herself. I cannot be happy with my own self-fulfilment. Levinas ‘s theory offers a way to combine the vision of a duty to serve values and to help others while respecting their freedom.

The lower right quadrant, the pragmatist interventionist is best illustrated by the utilitarian philosophers (Bentham, Stuart Mill). It is not by chance that they came up in the XIXth century, in a country which was then leading the industrial revolution. They were the spearhead of the view on ethics as assessed through the consequences of actions. However, they had predecessors. Note that the issue of actions aiming at bringing some overarching good, but carrying some unintentional and damaging side effects (re. the omelette you can’t make without breaking eggs) had already been theorized by Thomas of Aquinas; through what was named the double effect doctrine, he claimed that such actions were ethically acceptable...

Finally, the lower left quadrant, the pragmatist minimalist: I have mentioned Palo Alto school. More generally, all psychotherapeutic school which do not try to enforce a model of behaviour and let the person find her way can be possible roots for this kind of logic. Psychoanalysis, often considered as very remote from Palo Alto, can also inspire variants of this logic, provided the consultant does not forget she is not in a psychotherapeutical setting. But they all have ancestors. In the rich debates of ancient Greece, those which were called the Skeptics already questioned the ambition of some of their colleagues to reach any truth about the world and hence

¹³ Lao-Tseu - Tao-Tö-King.

recommended to suspend any belief. Long ago, already, the debate about what we can know, and hence about what can legitimize our actions in the world, was open.

If those are widespread and everlasting debates, then the logics we have studied here might well apply beyond the context of organizations and apply to any change in the social world. This would of course need further validation but one can at least easily see how these logics can be followed by various social activists in the wider societal sense of the word.

4.2. On hybrids

This very short review of age old debates suggests that human beings visit the same landscapes, generation after generation. I would suggest that all logics resonate with something on us to some extent. Though I have found examples in my interviews that could well illustrate each of them, it is likely that all of my interviewees could feel familiar with any of them in some respects.

This can be because we can be for instance minimalists in some circumstances and interventionists in some others. Apart from Lao Tseu's ermit, it seems anyway difficult to stay in the minimalist logic in all circumstances of life.

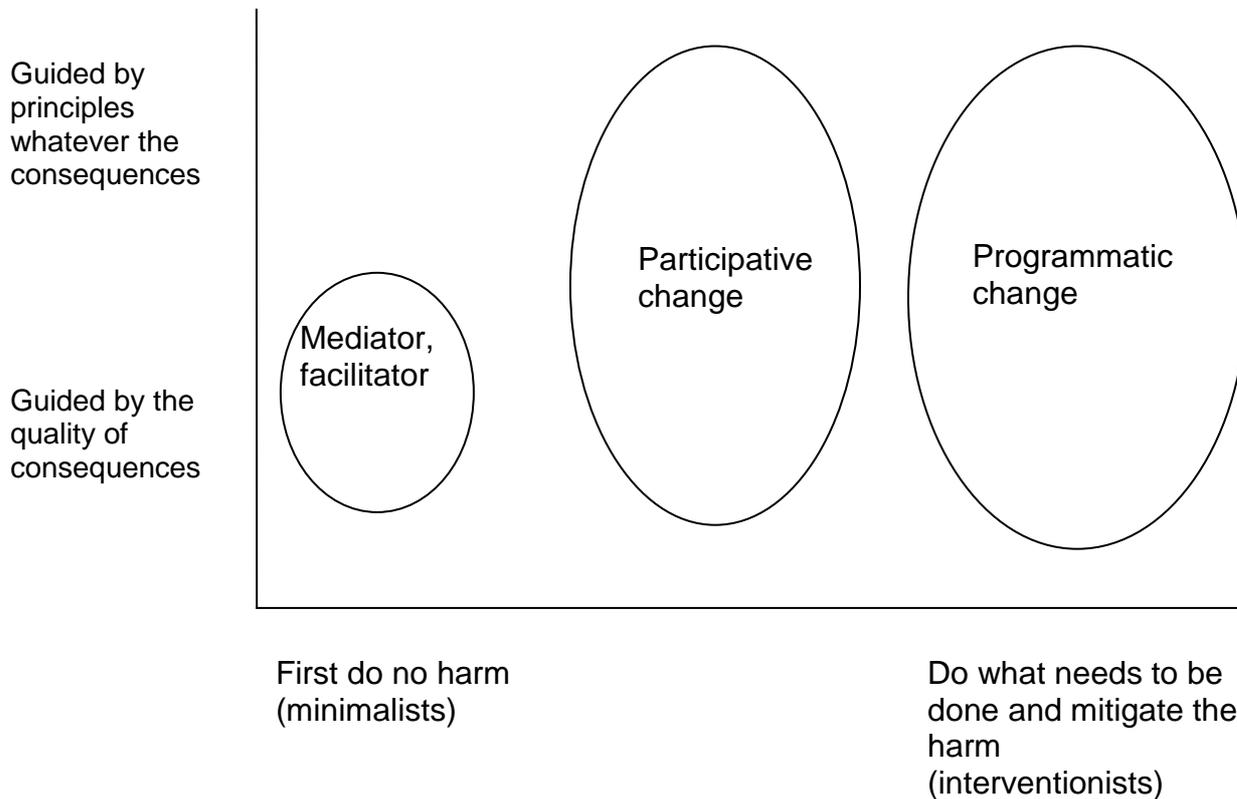
This can also be because we build our own hybrids of these logics.

To give a few examples, I have placed on the map below typical change strategies. Programmatic change means top-down processes, initiated and directed from the top, run like a project with clear targets and little openness to employees initiatives. Participative change leaves more initiative to employees; the role of leader is to give a vision, facilitate/stimulate the emergence of a change where employees contribute to the invention of the new way of doing things according to this vision.

Programmatic change can be done either from an idealist logic (i.e. justified by values being served here and now) or a pragmatist one (i.e. justified by an outcome which will be the greater good). But some would say that they are equally convinced that what they do is satisfying their values in the present and will also yield good consequences in the future. They would then say that they equally follow the idealist interventionist logic and the pragmatist interventionist logic. This may be partly illusory. Though both could be present in the person's mind, doing good in the present does not always bring good consequences in the future and there may be moments of truth when one needs to make choices and when true priorities are unveiled.

Participative change is another example of hybridization of logics. In this kind of process, the CEO, and even the consultant helping him/her, take sides. They do not precisely decide of what will happen, but they nevertheless have to decide about the vision, the over-arching direction towards which the organization will move. They will then facilitate dialogues, empowerment of employees, so that these can decide by themselves on a number of aspects of the change, which brings the CEO close to the facilitator, mediator, minimalist logic. Even though damages will be mitigated through the empowering process, the simple fact that a new over-arching direction will be taken may cause damages to some people which will therefore need to be justified

by some greater good being achieved (lower part of the “adaptive” bubble in the map), or by the service of some values (upper part of the bubble).



Henri Atlan, a French biologist, wrote¹⁴ that life takes place in a state that lies between crystal and smoke. Crystal is perfect order, smoke is total chaos; life cannot develop in either of these contexts. It seems that our ethical choices need to emulate life: it is difficult to rigidly always stick to the same logic but it is also weak to just say we are everywhere in the map. In this latter case, this might well mean being nowhere or being brought where the latest wind blows, the wind of other people’s interests, of our own fears or ego satisfactions. The key in this dance with several logics is probably self-awareness, i.e. the awareness of the logic we play, at a given time, and of when and why we shift to another one. This is probably the best we can hope for ourselves...

¹⁴ Entre le cristal et la fumée – 1979, Paris, Seuil.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have set out a few ethical issues pertaining to the purpose and consequences of an organizational change.

- Do I allow myself to instrumentalize others ? If yes, whom and under which conditions ?
- If I do not allow myself, in principle, to instrumentalize others, do I nevertheless accept an indirect instrumentalization, i.e. that the common or greater good should be searched for at the cost of some people's disadvantage or suffering ? Under which conditions ?
- How do I define what is beneficial or detrimental to an individual or to a social group ?

... which led to key questions when addressing an organizational change situation:

- Does the purpose of the change entail instrumentalizing some stakeholders in order to benefit others ? If yes, am I ok with it ?
- If some stakeholders are experiencing what I regard as damages of some kind, is the change nevertheless worth achieving?
- For which period of time in the future can I assess that change will be beneficial ? What are the risks for people involved beyond this period ?

I have then described three possible logics, based on my interviews, that can be followed in order to ethically face these issues. I have even sketched a fourth one, which was not present in my interviews but could be derived from them as a secret sibling, a hidden opposite. These logics enable people to link in various ways their answers to the above questions, the way they regard themselves as legitimate to perform their change agent job, and the kind of job they will be ethically comfortable to do. Because of this link, ethics are therefore a powerful channel to a better awareness of who we each want to be as human beings through our actions in the world.

Those three logics are derived from answers we give more or less explicitly to another set of a few basic questions:

- Do I act according to principles, whatever the consequences? In that case, which ones ? Or do I act according to expected consequences of my action and to their contribution to what can be considered to be a better situation in ethical terms ? In that case, according to which criteria ?
- How far can I or should I intervene in the social world ? How far does the risk of damages for not doing things exceed the risk of damages for doing them ?

I hope this leaves readers with food for thought, as intended. More precisely, it leaves them with questions. If being ethical has to do with self-awareness, as I have suggested above, then it is not a state that one reaches, it is a never-ending process, and there is nothing like questions with no quick answers to keep us on track..

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