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A genuine ethic of responsibility that restores the trust in human beings

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Abstract

The honesty that generates confidence, or the lack of honesty that loses it, seems to be at the heart of the issue of sustainable development. And of its future. The paper analyses two examples coming from personal experience and draws some principles and concrete courses of action. The first example refers to the Volkswagen-Audi affair or scandal, the second one to usual food quality. The conclusion pleids for a genuine ethic of responsibility that restores the trust of women and men in human beings, in citizens who are more honest because they are more aware of their contribution to sustainability.

Key words: Brundtland Report, confidence, ethics, Václav Havel, food security, foresight, responsability, sustainability, US Environment Protection Agency, Volkswagen-Audi

Introduction

When one considers the qualities of the good foresight specialist or foresight team, one concludes that both creativity and rigour are required; above all, in-depth system analysis needs to be combined with a far-reaching and wide-ranging viewpoint, a cross-disciplinary mind-set and strategic will: in other words, there must be action, determination and the technical capacity for implementation. In the public domain, there is also a need for detachment from political contingencies and timing constraints in order to ensure the independence of foresight. An emeritus professor of the National Conservatory of Arts and Crafts in Paris, the economist Jacques Lesourne, who formerly held the Chair of Industrial Foresight, believes that the fundamental quality criterion for foresight is intellectual honesty (Lesourne 2000). On the other hand, the promoters of the *State of the Future*, the directors of The Millennium Project Elizabeth Florescu and Jerry Glenn wrote in their 2015-2016 report that *the proliferation of unethical decisions that led to the 2008 crisis clearly demonstrated the interdependence of economic results and ethics. Quick fixes avoided a global financial collapse and pulled the world out of recession, but the underlying ethical questions have not been addressed sufficiently to prevent futures crises* (Glenn, Florescu, and The Millennium Project Team 2015).

The honesty that generates confidence, or the lack of honesty that loses it, seems to me today to be at the heart of the issue of sustainable development. And of its future. I will try to show this through two examples from my own personal experience, from which I will then derive some principles and concrete courses of action.

Technological manipulation and efficient poisoning

No one will be surprised if I take my first example from what is now being referred to as the Volkswagen-Audi affair or scandal, which has assumed global proportions since 18 September 2015, the date on which the US Environment Protection Agency (EPA) criticised

the attitude of the leading global automotive group and an investigation was launched by the Justice Department of the United States. Behind these investigations is an American NGO called the International Council on Clean Transportation, which had commissioned West Virginia University to perform a study of the comparative levels of pollution from diesel engines in the United States and Europe. The tests conducted by the researchers in real traffic conditions revealed far higher pollution levels (between 20 and 35 times higher than the legal limit, depending on the model) than those reported by the manufacturer. The EPA in California therefore notified Volkswagen and Audi that they were in breach of the Clean Air Act, and found that the models sold in the United States since 2009 (some 482,000 vehicles) had software that circumvented the emissions standards established by the EPA. Contrary to what is regularly claimed, the American standards are far stricter than those in force in Europe (United States Environmental Protection Agency 2015). The EPA's announcement produced a chain reaction, as it quickly became apparent that the engines of all the manufacturer's vehicles around the world – more than 11 million cars – were fitted with this cheat device. In addition to the financial damage this has caused in various global stock exchanges, the irreversible collapse of trust in this leading German group has brought about an economic disaster.

I have chosen this example because it constitutes a flagrant illustration of my point, but also because I understand its effects on an individual level, as I have been personally affected by this affair.

On 24 May 2013, after 40 years of loyalty to a French make, I entered, as the welcome letter put it, the 'world of Audi' for the first time. The message was clearly indicated on the documents that were handed to me that day: Audi San Mazuin Namur thanked me for the 'trust' I had shown in them. It was important for me to know, they wrote, that 'my satisfaction' was their 'absolute priority'(San Mazuin 2015). The delivery of the vehicle was presented as a special experience, as indeed it probably was, with due pomp and circumstance.

My motivation for this change was that I wanted a clean and efficient vehicle. The model was an Audi A4 Sedan TDIe (for 'efficiency'), with a 2 litre, 136 hp engine, emissions advertised on the order form of 112 g of CO2 per kilometre (emission standard EU5 according to Directive 94/12/EC) on mixed-drive trips, and fuel consumption of 4.3 litres (1999/100/EC).

Having reduced my vehicle's engine power in order to reduce my fuel consumption and limit emissions during the years prior to this purchase, I have to admit that this new Audi gave me driving pleasure while ensuring that I was behaving in line with the logic of sustainability that I regularly advocate. Living in the countryside, I make a lot of trips by car. Although I regularly use the train to travel to Brussels and Paris, I drive more than 30,000 km per year. Various contacts with my Audi dealer over the course of twenty months gave me almost complete satisfaction, even though I was sometimes slightly irritated by the ea-

gerness with which the staff got me to fill in satisfaction surveys on touch screens, and their insistence that I should assign them the highest ratings. In February 2014, I received a brochure from my dealer that reminded me that 'the Audi warranties' represented 'peace of mind in all circumstances'. And that my car was under 'a comprehensive two-year warranty'. However, my trust was abruptly shattered long before the international scandal over the deceptive software.

On the morning of 17 February 2015, after 21 months and 88,000 kms, my Audi A4 broke down on the motorway, after I had driven about ten kilometres. The verdict was implacable: the clutch disc had gone, and the repair would cost more than 3,200 euros. To my shock, I was told that the warranty was not applicable, as there had been no oil leakage. The employee at Audi Mazuin was unwavering on this point: the repair was my responsibility and the Audi clutch could not be defective. I must have been driving with my foot on the clutch pedal (when you have been driving for 40 years and you were taught by your father, who was a motor mechanic, that really amuses you). And then came the hammer blow: 'If you are not happy, simply find a lawyer and go to court. You will not be the first to lose.' Most surprising of all, perhaps, for a specialist in evaluation, was the answer I was given when, after collecting my repaired vehicle, I asked the attendant why on this particular day I had not been presented with the touch screen in order to record my views about the service: 'No need, we could see that you weren't happy'.

Need I say that what I felt went beyond mere dissatisfaction? I had a real sense of betrayal and, above all, of a breach of trust. This was six months before the VW-Audi scandal. The research I carried out at that time gave me some hints and a few first-hand accounts – although they did not amount to proof – of the fragility of the clutches in these models, as well as of the hauteur, not to say arrogance, of the manufacturer on this subject. Nevertheless, I preferred to believe that the problem was more to do with the dealership than with the manufacturer.

The circular letter – I know it was this as it was unsigned and addressed 'Dear Sir or Madam' – that I received on 7 October 2015, bearing the Audi logo and written by the Director of Audi Import Belgium, confirmed this arrogance. It stated that it was the Volkswagen Group that had admitted having installed software to show a reduction in the level of of nitrogen oxide emissions when vehicles were tested. It was the Volkswagen Group that had identified my Audi among the tampered vehicles, and neither the distributor nor 'we' (was that Audi or the Import Director?) 'were aware of these irregularities', which they regretted. Thus, the Volkswagen Group was mentioned four times, as the external agent of which Audi had been the victim (Didier Willems 2015).

Local junk food

After the Volkswagen-Audi Affair, most of the comments that could be read in the social networks and heard in the media and the statements by politicians of all stripes tended to denounce unregulated capitalism and go on at length about profiteering, unscrupulous

businesses and financial groups and so on. They often contrasted such behaviour with another model, that of sustainable development, environmentalism and even green politics.

This is why I wish to set alongside my first example, which was bound up in a personal experience but had a global aspect, another situation that was very different. When we bring together these two experiences, this second situation will compel us to draw more nuanced conclusions.

Just a few kilometres from the Audi garage, on the same main road, lies a large store based on an idea that I strongly support. I will not mention the store's name, as its financial capacity is nowhere near that of a global automotive group. It is a grocery store that has set itself the goal of 'encouraging shopping behaviour that favours local products'. It sells hundreds – perhaps as many as a thousand – products of certified authenticity, supplied by 150 producers, most of which have been made less than 30 kms from the point of sale. The company, which has won several labels in this field, describes itself as 'a sustainable and innovative business' and aims to be a partner to 'active and responsible customers'. Coincidentally, I discovered this store at about the same time I changed my car, and I went there fairly regularly to buy food, particularly dairy products, fruit and some meat sourced from local butchers and farms. I frequently recommended the store to my family and friends. Until the day…

Until the day in June 2015 when, returning from Namur, I did some quick shopping on my way home. While I was preparing the ordinary sausages I had purchased in this supposedly sustainable store, my attention was caught by a printed label on the back of the packaging. It was the list of ingredients that the product contained, as required by European regulations(European Parliament and Council of the European Union 2011): *Beef 79%, sauce (water, sambal (chilli, acidity regulator (E260)), salt, soya oil, modified starch (corn), milk protein, spices, colouring (E160c), stabilisers (E450, E451), thickeners (E412, E415), preservative (E202, E211), gluten, egg, fish, mustard, celery, water, vegetable fibre (bamboo), stabilisers (E262, E331), salt, antioxidants (E301, E300)*

Obviously, I cannot guarantee the quality of my transcription 100%, given the size of the font. Reading the label, I felt as though I had crossed the European motorway network from one side to the other. Not being a chemist (although I studied a combination of Latin/humanities and sciences), it was probably the idea of the fish in my banger that I found most offensive, along with the instruction *Bien cuire / Goed doorgaren* ('Cook thoroughly'), which a beef product would not necessarily require. My reaction was clear and simple. I tossed the 324 grams of *corpus delicti* in the bin and have never set foot in the store since, and never will. 'Trust', you said?

Conclusion: sustainable development as ethics of responsibility

To leave the anecdotal side of these two tales behind, I wish to come back to the question of the future of sustainable development, drawing a few lessons – both general and personal – from these two experiences.

Our scientific instincts bring us to a standard and a question. The standard is a definition of sustainable development on which everyone can agree. The question is how this type of development is affected by these two experiences and what this may mean for the future of our civilisation.

I will not waste your time and mine on the issue of sustainable development. As far as I am concerned, the best definition is still that of the Brundtland Report. This refers, as you know, to meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs. However, we often forget the two priorities that are then mentioned: the attention we must pay to the most disadvantaged members of society, and the limitations that both technology and social organisation impose on the environment.

You will tell me – and rightly so – that the most disadvantaged couldn't care less about cheat software that affects the health of drivers and their families, and, what is more, they have little opportunity to be picky about the quality of chicken breast, tuna or chopped beef they find at cheaper outlets. True enough. My answer is that the cynicism that seems to prevail throughout the value chain, starting with the products that are labelled 'premium' or 'sustainable', 'organic' or 'local' (as in 'local produce') – which nowadays represent an alternative form of luxury – augurs ill for those who shop in the largest supermarkets that carry no quality labels. At the same time, it should be pointed out that the vigilance of citizens and NGOs, and the checks made by public bodies such as the EPA in the United States or the AFSCA in Belgium for foodstuffs, represent a safeguard. We should also remember that every major crisis – the Union Carbide disaster in Bhopal, dioxin chickens in Belgium, contaminated blood in France, mad cow disease in the UK, the disaster incurred by Tepco at Fukushima Daiichi and the dishonest software of the Volkswagen-Audi Group, to name but a few – serve as learning experiences for sustainable development.

Returning to the Brundtland Report, it will be recalled that this advocates a quest for harmony, meaning a happy combination of the elements of a system which ensures that those elements contribute to the same overall effect and so enable it to achieve its aims. Thus, sustainable development activates a series of subsystems that make the coherence of the whole possible and contribute to the achievement of its objectives: effective participation by citizens in decision-making, the ability to generate economic surpluses and to create technical knowledge on a sustained and self-reliant basis, the ability to find solutions to tensions arising from disharmonious development, respect for the obligation to preserve the ecological base for development, the search for new technological solutions, answers to international questions concerning trade and finance, and administrative flexibility that leaves room for self-correction, and in particular evaluation processes (UNWCED 1987).

The Brundtland Report also addressed the role of transnational corporations, especially in the automotive sector – one of the subjects that were judged to be very environmentally sensitive (p. 72). The Norwegian Prime Minister and her United Nations team also called for a reduction of urban and industrial air pollution, and regretted the feebleness of efforts to combat automobile pollution, showing that it had systemic effects on both the global environment and human health (p. 143-144). On food issues, the report talks more about global security of supply than about the issue of quality from a health viewpoint, other than in the scenario of a nuclear accident.

We have seen, however, that the answers to the questions we have asked and to the experiences we have had or observed were not technical or normative in nature, given that standards do exist in these areas. The answers we are looking for, the safeguards for which we are calling, are of a different nature: they are moral, ethical ones. In the last part of her 1987 report, Gro Hartlem Brundtland wrote that she had 'tried to show how human survival and well-being could depend on success in elevating sustainable development to a global ethic' (p. 252).

It is here that the future of sustainable development probably lies: in its ability to turn, beyond international targets, guidelines and regulations, into a common and shared conscience, into a morality that prevails over petty profit, grubby trickery and deceptions that pose a threat to health. A genuine ethic of responsibility that restores the trust of women and men in human beings, in citizens who are more honest because they are more aware that by contributing to the advancement of our common path, they are helping ensure the survival of their children and grandchildren. And, incidentally, their own.

Can we remind ourselves of Václav Havel's message when he said high and loud that truth and love must prevail over lies and hatred? Professor Pavel Novacek, chair of the Central Europe Node of The Millennium Project and author of a remarkable book about sustainable development, quotes these words of the president-philosopher: *I have no illusion to be the one to change the world. However, I proceed from the imperative that each and every one of us is obliged to act as if they were able to improve the entire world* (Nováček 2011).

We all know that the task seems endless and that, in fact, we will never be enough to achieve it.

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