Assessment: a question of responsibility

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Following in the footsteps of postmodernity, assessment practices have been gradually and continuously gaining ground to the point where they now pervade all areas of our daily life. We assess, and we are assessed, almost everywhere and for almost anything, and this will always have consequences, particularly if one persists in assessing that which cannot be assessed (C. Haroche, 2010). If we focus our attention on the most common definition of the verb assess, however, that is "to issue a judgment on the value of X", where X may be a thing or person, we soon realise which paradigm we should be thinking in terms of and applying to assessment: the paradigm of ethics.

Assessment approached from the paradigm of ethics

Assessment consists in evaluating, appreciating or judging the value of something, or someone, in accordance with certain expectations, an ideal or a reference[2], related to personal and/or shared values. The two terms associated with the verb assess, that is, *value* and *judge*, are inextricably linked to the concepts of Good[3] and Justice[4]. And these two concepts, in turn, lead us to the two great schools of moral philosophy, consequentialism, which prioritises what is Good[5], and deontology, which prioritises Justice[6]. Thus, for the deontologist, "the moral value of an act is based on rules, some of which are intangible", while for the consequentialist "the moral value of an act depends only on its consequences" (M. Neuberg, 1997, p. 19)

There is nothing insignificant about making value judgments. To judge, we need time to deliberate, which is the same as saying time to reflect and to analyse[7], time to weigh up the pros and cons before pronouncing judgment[8]. And pronouncing judgment on the value of something or someone first requires a minimum amount of awareness of one's own values, values on the basis of which our reality is perceived, then interpreted according to criteria drawn from our own knowledge or lack thereof (E. Morin, 2004) and finally awarded sense and meanings (E. Jünger, 1995).

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[2] A reference we could define as J.-M. Barbier (1985, p. 72) does, as "that related to what the judging of value does, or may do".

[3] The word *value*, derived from the Latin form *valor*, originally referred to bravery or courage. In contemporary philosophy, value has gradually been substituted by the expression *good* (A. Lalande, p. 1184).

[4] From the Latin *jūs, jūris* –originally a "religious formula of legal value"–, the original meaning of "to judge" refers to law and justice.

[5] Good is actually more readily associated with Aristotelian ethics.

[6] Justice, commonly found in Kantian morality.

[7] "As to deliberate is to look for something" (Aristotle, 1992, p. 181).

[8] When defining assessment, P. Ricoeur emphasises the stance taken by the assessor. Therefore, and we share his idea, in its principal meaning "to judge" consists not only in "expressing one's opinion, appraising or considering correct, but (also and) ultimately, pronouncing judgment" (P. Ricoeur, 1995, p. 186).

However, although assessment is a question of ethics, it is also a question of method (M. Beauvais, 2006a). In our approach to it, we must think of the conditions and tools that might favour effectiveness and relevance, without ever losing sight of the initial aim of assessment, that is, to pronounce judgment on the value of something, an aim which is far from neutral. When we pronounce judgment on value, we contribute to maintaining and reinforcing it, we contribute to increasing the value[9] of that which we aim to assess.

We therefore defend the idea that assessment (due to it being related to human aspects) is not only never neutral, but also contributes to legitimising values and even producing new ones[10] (M. Lecointe, 1997). Due to its important role in maintaining and producing common values, assessment involves the permanent questioning of one's own values (J. Ardoino, G. Berger, 1989). And on the basis of the latter a judgment will be pronounced and a stance taken which will involve consequences that are in part unpredictable and which we know from the outset we will not be able to dominate.

Furthermore, if assessment is never neutral this is also because the assessor, as a human being, cannot avoid introducing her subjectivity into the assessment, her own designs. The assessor, when perceiving a reality, not a fixed reality, but a constructed and projected one (J.-P. Sartre, 1996), makes her choices. She chooses specific elements of reality over others and interprets them on the basis of criteria that may belong to the sphere of subjectivity, emotions, objectivity or reason (R. Ogien, 2004). What is more, when she expresses herself in relation to the value of the perceived and interpreted object, she not only reveals the objective criteria she uses to assess, but also in part her intentions towards the world and her relationship with it and the Other – by whom we mean the one being assessed.

Having said that, if assessment increases value, if it produces value, it can also lower value and produce counter value. When the assessor neglects to question her own values, when she does not doubt the "ideals" (F. Nietzsche, 2002) she uses to make a judgment value, and when out of laziness or weakness (H. Arendt, 1972) she lets herself be led by habit, she risks devaluing that thing or person on which she is pronouncing judgment. Given this context it is worth addressing the issue of the responsibility of assessment.

Within the framework of this article, we propose reflecting upon assessment in the fields of education and training, whether it falls within the context of the training process, or as a theoretically useful tool for the learning process, or is used only for validating or certifying prescribed knowledge. We aim to do this from the perspective of ethics, placing special emphasis on the issue of responsibility.

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[9] In line with A. De Peretti (2000, p. 367), who defends the idea that the purpose of assessment is "to award value to actions and people".

[10] An idea which is far from unanimously held. For example, J. Cardinet (1989, p. 50) appeals for assessment free from value judgments.

Assessment as a promise of increased value

Before summarising the benefits of assessment as a promise of increased value it is worth highlighting what conditions are required, so as to design and execute them in a *good*[11] and/or *just*[12] way. As a social practice and in the area of interest to us here – educational practice – an *ideal* (or even *idealist*) version would see assessment approached and applied in context and taking into account the individual circumstances and aims of all those involved. Equally, we must also stop to question our own aims with regard to assessment in order to clarify what meaning and purpose it has for us: assessment, to achieve what? For whom? Why? And we could also add: in whose name? These questions equally affect oneself, as the author-actor of the assessment, as all others involved.

Furthermore, it is important to study which methods are most suitable, that is, those which allow a response to questions of meaning and favour increased value in what we wish to assess. Methodological questions, those we associate with *how*, which are related to procedures, methods and means, must always be linked to meaning.

Following this, still from an *ideal* perspective, and given that assessment in education and training also obliges us to take into account the intersubjective relationship, the assessor will try to adopt the *correct stance*, that which allows the Other, the person whose learning we wish to assess, to choose and pronounce judgment, to position herself in this context that transports her to the foreground. The relationship between trainer and trainee, even if aspiring to equality and based on reciprocity, in the Fichtean sense[13], is a relationship that does not allow the places and roles of each person to be exchanged or confused (M. Beauvais, 2010). To not think about one's own stance involves the risk of sliding down the slope of imposture, deceiving the Other with regard to the situation, roles, places and responsibilities of the true protagonists of assessment: the assessor and the assessed. The challenges they must face are different, they do not share the same objectives or the same risks, and their responsibilities are therefore also different. The responsibility of one, the assessor, exceeds and encompasses the responsibility of the Other, the assessed. And these responsibilities cannot be addressed only within the framework of training. To think about the responsibility of each actor equates to thinking about the relationship with oneself, with the Other and with the world.

We know that responsibility is related to response (M. Beauvais, 2006b) and promise[14]. When assessment affects training, the trainer-assessor's responsibility is doubly at stake, not only because she *promises* the person being trained that she meets the necessary requirements for carrying out the training, but also because she *promises* to pronounce judgment on the validity of the knowledge the trainee will have acquired, constructed or

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[11] In the Aristotelian sense, that is, taking into account the context and effects on a person or different people at a given time.

[12] In the Kantian sense, that is, solely for its own sake, referring to universal values, regardless of context, subject or time considerations.

[13] According to which approach I can only define myself as a free being if I am in a relationship of free beings. (J. G. Fichte, 1998).

[14] Etymology links the idea of responsibility to the idea of commitment. In Latin, "spondēre", "sponsus", means "assume a solemn, religious-style, commitment". "Respondere" can therefore be translated as "responding to a solemnly adopted commitment".

invented[15], and even on the way in which the latter acquires, constructs or invents it. The trainer-assessor thereby fulfils two principal functions of assessment: those of regulating the training action and acting as a catalyst to learning. That done, there is no room for self-congratulation, as providing a response to the educational and formative goal of assessment also validates her work and adds value to her constructive teaching and training skills.

Nevertheless, although assessment produces value, it can also produce countervalue, and on this point it is important to act with particular clarity if we wish to at the very least assume our responsibility as trainers-assessors. What can we say about the division of responsibilities between trainee and trainer? What can we say about the responsibility of the value or countervalue generated by the assessment action? Which part of this corresponds to the trainee? Which part to the trainer? On this point, it is worth remembering that to assess is to judge. The words of P. Ricoeur (1995, p. 186) remind us that "the act of judging […] is an act that divides, that separates". Therefore, assuming responsibility as an assessor may equate to assuming one's own choices, not only in the definition of assessment criteria and indicators, or in the construction of tools and methods necessary for applying them, but also in assuming all of the consequences of assessment – whether foreseen or unforeseen, desirable or undesirable – produced as both part of a process and as part of a product that creates or destroys value.

In order to advance further with this reflection regarding the question of responsibility in assessment, we propose the adoption of a series of interpretive keys from contemporary philosophers who hold essentially maximalist views of responsibility.

Maximalist concepts of responsibility

First and foremost, it is worth clarifying some ideas surrounding maximalism. In philosophy, there are as many concepts of responsibility as philosophers interested in the subject. However, when we attempt to understand these concepts by integrating them into the more global dimension of the author's philosophical thought, it is fairly easy to identify which great schools of thought might form a basis for questioning our own concept of responsibility. This will help us to differentiate between ethical and political and maximalist and minimalist concepts of responsibility. On the basis of this distinction it will also be easier to comment on them and, if necessary, adopt a stance towards them.

If in its ethical version responsibility is related to virtue in the Aristotelian sense, in its political version it is related to action in the world. And if in the maximalist version responsibility is infinite and inaccessible, in the minimalist version it is restricted to positive obligations, that is, not to voluntarily cause harm to the Other.[16]

Therefore, whichever way we approach responsibility, but particularly if we do so as trainers-assessors, it is important to first be aware of the perspective we adopt. Is it more of an ethical or political perspective? A maximalist or minimalist perspective? These perspectives involve different forms of responsibility and also very different assessments of these forms and their effects.

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[15] In relation to its reference paradigm.
[16] In this case, particularly in reference to the minimalist version of R. Ogien (2007).

In line with our concept of assessment, we propose thinking about the responsibility of assessment in education and training from a maximalist, ethical or political perspective. The fact is that minimalist ethical principles[17], which reduce our responsibility towards the Other to an extreme, are not suitable, in our opinion, as an approach to the responsibility of assessment. No one ignores the ethical paradox linked to educational or training actions (M. Fabre, 1994). In her aspiration to participate in the development and complexification of the Other and the further aspiration to judge the value of the latter's learning, the trainer-assessor accepts from the outset an unequal relationship which for the Other translates into one of dependency. And it is precisely this relationship that generates a responsibility towards the Other.

The maximalist ethics of responsibility of Sartre, Jonas or Lévinas share the aim of extending human responsibility to the infinite. That is, as we are human, we are responsible, completely and definitively, for other humans (J.-P. Sartre, 1943, 1997), for humanity and its future (H. Jonas, 1990, 1998) and, in another *maximum* version of maximalism, as we are responsible, we are at the same time human (E. Lévinas, 1987) and my responsibility therefore constitutes my subjectivity. These concepts, although hyperbolic and perhaps even impossible to countenance or, in particular, implement on a daily basis, do offer key considerations that can help us to think about and, above all, better act out our responsibility, especially with regard to training and assessment.

Bad faith and the responsibility of assessment

One of these key considerations could be Sartre's (J.-P. Sartre, 1997, p. 109) escaping along the path of "bad faith", which consists in first deceiving oneself in order to better bear the weight of one's own responsibilities, or rather to lighten the load so as to bear oneself better and not see, or even glimpse, in oneself the cowardly person we could not bear to be. This escape is a simple reflex action we all share and, if we have minimum aspirations to seek equality and justice, it should serve as a warning, constituting as it does an easily identifiable indicator of a possible "imposture". J.-P. Sartre clearly presents the inseparable link existing between "good faith" and "bad faith" (J.-P. Sartre, 1997, p. 89-102). Only by becoming aware of our "episodes" of bad faith can we gradually begin to walk towards good faith.

As a trainer-assessor concerned with the legitimacy of my own practices, would it not be normal to suspect myself if I claim motives, some more rational than others, to limit my responsibility? If I try to *pass it* on to others, including, in particular, the person I am training and assessing, under the pretext of considering her an *actor*, or even *author*, of her learning? If I consider, perhaps too hastily, and above all too often, that it is her responsibility to define her objectives, to find and activate her own resources and then assess herself and therefore take responsibility for the entire process? By repeatedly insisting on situating the trainee at the centre of the training and assessment process, are we not transferring responsibility for this process onto them? At times, the confusion of positions and roles reaches such an extreme that there only appears to be one actor, the one being trained and assessed. And all of the responsibilities are deposited onto this actor: the trainee becomes her own trainer, the assessed her own assessor, and always, of course, under the pretext of making the pupil autonomous and responsible.

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[17] Which in the case of R. Ogien (2007, p. 155-156) are limited to three: "considering (everyone) equal", the absence of prejudice and the "moral indifference of the relationship with oneself".

The imposture all of this represents is related to "sweet barbarism" (J.-P., Le Goff, 1999) and, what is more, is only one example of the countless lies in which we lose ourselves in order to shun our responsibilities, particularly when we are required to judge the value of generated knowledge.

The responsibility of assessment for the future

A further key aspect for interpretation may be found in H. Jonas' (1990, 1998) responsibility for the future. The originality of Jonas' concept of responsibility lies in the fact that it invites us to witness the future before it happens. In the view of this author, man is responsible not only for today's human race, but also for guaranteeing its future. What is more, the relevance of his choices and actions can only be assessed by taking into account the resulting effects and consequences in a more or less immediate future. And the more confused the consequences of his actions, the more difficult it will be to cope with them and the more compromised his responsibility will be, a situation which will push him towards doubt and even abstention.

As we have already mentioned, to conceive an assessment action involves first being able to answer the question of the meaning of assessment: for what purpose are we assessing? If this question remains unanswered, it is important to reevaluate the relevance of the assessment action and, if necessary, even abandon the idea of assessing. We also know, as many authors have denounced (C. Haroche, 2010), that an excess of assessment generates distrust, misgivings, loss of confidence in oneself and in the Other, and even "limitation of thought"[18] (J. Birman, 2010). When it does not respect individual circumstances and time considerations, especially in relation to learning, assessment very quickly becomes counterproductive. It no longer involves increasing value, or favouring learning, but rather restrains and inhibits it. The multiple requirements of justifying, constantly and before anyone, things that have not yet been learnt, constructed or fully understood undermine the individual, who does not even find the time and space to justify what he generates to himself.

If the responsibility of assessment is framed within the future, it is not only because it obliges us to ask ourselves the question of what assessment generates and how it contributes to learning, but also because it invites us to question what it will generate tomorrow, when we will no longer be here to train, assess and accompany those we have endorsed, whom we have certified[19] as having the prescribed knowledge. And this brings us back to our own designs for training: what citizen, what professional do we wish to train for tomorrow? It also highlights the ethical paradox inherent in the responsibility of assessment, that is, that of the assessor stating with a minimum of certainty whether the knowledge acquired and the competences developed today by the trained person will allow them to act as a citizen and/or professional tomorrow, a tomorrow that we must always situate within a framework of uncertainty and which will not have us to assume the consequences of our training and assessment actions.

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[18] Which does not involve ceasing to question current assessment policies used for research and teacher-researchers.

[19] Certify, from the original Latin *certus*, means "guarantee that a thing is true".

The "without why" responsibility of assessment

Finally, we must highlight a third key element, a kind of "password for responsibility", according to E. Lévinas. In this philosopher's view, responsibility has neither limits nor justifications. In the words of A. Zielinski (2004), "there is no why". I am not responsible because I am human, as J.-P. Sartre and H. Jonas would have it, but I am human because I am responsible. And this responsibility is infinite, inaccessible, without reciprocity and unconditional (E. Lévinas, 1987). In Lévinas' concept of responsibility, no ends allow for the shunning of responsibility, not even escaping along the path of bad faith. It would appear to be difficult to predict here how a responsibility of this type might translate into actions in our daily life. However, a concrete glimpse of this unconditional responsibility free from reciprocity may be had by referring back to the Lévinas formula: I do not consider myself responsible because I am an assessor, rather I am an assessor because I am responsible. The person I aspire to train and/or assess transfers all the responsibility to me simply by making me trainer and/or assessor. To pass a judgment on the value of a thing and/or a person, and thereby contribute to maintaining or generating new values, involves a responsibility on my part towards the Other and in the context of the world we share. We are now no longer analysing responsibility solely from the ethical viewpoint, but also the political, in the meaning expressed by H. Arendt (2005).

In our cluster of key aspects for interpreting responsibility within the context of training, and in particular assessment, Lévinas' responsibility acts as a "password". A password which opens the door to venture beyond the minimalist limits of responsibility, limits which, by prohibiting any interference[20] in the use the Other decides to award her training, and in the name of the same values and the same idols (F. Nietzsche, 2002), under the guise of goals to promote either autonomy or responsibility, also contribute to "sweet barbarism" (Le Goff, 1999).

So as to leave an open conclusion, we will add that although assessment is a question of ethics and responsibility, it is also a question of courage. Courage to judge, courage to participate in the production and renewal of values on the basis of which to conceive our relationship with the world, with ourselves and with the other. Courage to act in uncertainty and to assume full responsibility; courage also to involve ourselves in that which does not at first affect us; courage to question the value of assessment and abstain from participating in it when it does not take into account the individual circumstances of the subjects, time considerations and contexts, when it is no longer adding value, but rather devaluing knowledge and people, and resulting in imposture.

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[20] See "the duty to interfere" developed in our work related to the question of the ethics of accompaniment (M. Beauvais, 2004).

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