**Theme: Sociotechnical design and responsibility**

Philosopher Hannah Arendt has coined the phrase “the banality of evil” to refer to the possible effects of bureaucratic forms of organizing on “moral responsibility”. A prime example she used was the case of Adolf Eichmann, whose trial in Jerusalem she attended. Eichmann was an SS-officer in the Second World War who played a key role in organizing the Holocaust. What surprised Arendt was that Eichmann appeared to be an appallingly average - banal - man. He appeared to her as a bureaucratic operative that concentrated on following bureaucratic rule, without much reflection and without experience of responsibility for the dreadful effects of his decision-making. In Arendt’s view, he even displayed a certain professional pride during his trial in a bureaucratic job well done.

The Eichmann case led Arendt to criticize bureaucracy as an organizational form that moves into the direction of ‘a rule by nobody’. In systems ruled by nobody, rule-following agents operate as cogs in a machine and are alienated from the very processes and outcomes they contribute to. As a result, bureaucracy may produce violent results as an aggregate effect of the behavior of these agents with “nobody” being very aware and therefore nobody taking responsibility. Recent historical research has indicated that Eichmann was a far more fanatical Nazi ideologue than he appeared during his trial. Furthermore, being in the top of the hierarchy, he certainly was not a good example of an average bureaucratic operative that just stuck to following rules. However, moving beyond the specific example, her critique on the relation between bureaucratic forms of organizing and moral responsibility is supported more broadly. For example, philosopher Ulrich Beck has called bureaucracies ‘systems of organized irresponsibility’.

In a sense, Arendt’s critique on bureaucracy appears as similar to the STS critique on bureaucracy. By emphasizing the importance of using the creative and flexible problem-solving capacities of human beings, the sociotechnical systems design approach offers an alternative to traditional bureaucratic design principles. It offers ways of designing organizations that are meant to avoid “alienation” and meant to avoid human beings being used as “cogs in the machine”. But does that therefore automatically mean that sociotechnical design principles lead to “moral responsibility” in organizations?

The following hypotheses are meant to trigger discussion about the ethics of the STS approach and to look for what the often presumed “normative aim” of STS entails:

* Applying sociotechnical design principles leads to less alienation, better dialogue and deliberation in organizations and as such they support social responsibility. As such, some essential prerequisites for achieving more “ethical organizations” are baked in the core of the STS approach. And “ethical” refers here to both the internal functioning of organizations (quality of working life) and external issues (broader societal responsibility).
* While the sociotechnical approach is normative regarding intra-organizational issues (“the quality of working life”), broader societal responsibilities are no part of the STS approach.
* Sociotechnical theory is free of ideology and is pragmatic in the sense that it is aimed at achieving real world outcomes which an organization says it is interested to achieve. “Responsibility” is always in service of such outcomes. So, STS principles may potentially be used to achieve “evil” outcomes, if an organization, or a society in a certain timeframe, is convinced that these outcomes are to be aspired for.
* Design-principles are like a surgeon’s knife which is meant to be used in favor of the health of patients but may just as well be used to wound them. The knife itself does not care. What keeps a surgeon from wounding people are personal or professional standards, not the knife itself. Societal responsibility is not the object of STS theory, nor should it be.
* Because “pure” STS-theory itself may be like a surgeon’s knife, and may be used for both good and evil, it is important for the STS community to work on the development of a professional standard, like a “do no harm” principle in medicine.