

# Risk, Responsibility and Reciprocity

Paul DUMOUCHEL

The concept of risk occupies a central place in modern reflection concerning catastrophes. Yet in many ways risk is a strange concept. Risk as it is generally understood is a measure of the probability of an unforeseen event and of its negative consequences. That is to say, the measure of the probability that the event will happen and the measure of its possible negative consequences, should it happen. In this second half of the measure, probability also intervenes, as we need to breakdown the event and its consequences into alternatives scenarios, and calculate the negative outcome of the event over the probability distribution of the different scenarios. What makes this strange, at least from an everyday point of view, is that risk calculation essentially constitutes knowledge about that-which-we-do-not-know, and even about that-which-we-cannot-know. We do not know when, and even if, an industrial accident or earthquake will happen. Yet we can calculate and provide an objective evaluation of the risk that this unforeseen and unforeseeable event presents to us. We can even take steps to reduce that risk.

The fundamental ignorance that lies at the heart of our concept of risk is further confirmed by the fact extensively documented by Charles Perrow and others that industrial disasters are always the result of highly improbable chains of events.<sup>1)</sup> Chains of chance whose probability was extremely low, which suggest that in spite of the knowledge which risk assessment gives us, it does not allow us to know any better the event itself. That is to say, the knowledge which risk assessment gives us concerning that-which-we-do-not-know does not allow us to know any better that-which-we-do-not-know. However, once we become aware of the fact that disasters result from highly unlikely chains of events, catastrophe prevention demands that we factor the highly improbable into our assessment of risk. Some may wish to argue that in such circumstances risk evaluation is impossible, but there is no reason to believe that to be the case, even though, clearly methodological and epistemological problems abound. Rather the real difficulty, as was pointed out by Ulrich Beck nearly twenty years ago, is that risk is not cognitively transparent from the first person's point of view.<sup>2)</sup> Given the paradoxical structure of the concept, i.e. knowledge of that-which-we-do-not-know, that is not excessively surprising. From a practical point of view, however, the cognitive opacity of risk has important consequences.

In English we sometimes use the expression 'clear and present danger', for danger often is directly perceivable and can be experienced. However, risk, as the measure of the probable consequences of a probable event, cannot be perceived directly. What is the risk involved in smoking another cigarette or of PM 2.5 pollution cannot be perceived the way we can experience

the danger of falling off a cliff or of oncoming traffic. To know what is the risk involved in certain activities or situations, we turn to experts. Unfortunately experts disagree. In consequence, as Beck also argues, at the individual level it becomes extremely difficult, if not impossible, to determine what constitutes an irrational reaction concerning risk, what it is to be irrationally afraid or excessively confident. More precisely, while passengers on a boat caught in a storm at sea or travelers robbed at gun point can easily share a common perception of the danger they face together, risk tends to individualize us. Agents tend to have quite different evaluations of what they cannot see or feel and often can only vaguely conceptualize. While we may all be exposed to the same risk, this 'same risk' is not a shared object of knowledge.

It follows that at the social level rational behaviour regarding risk is only possible (though not certain) if there exists commonly recognized trustworthy information concerning the risk involved in various activities and events. Providing such information should therefore be at the top of the agenda of responsible governments and of corporations which engage in risk generating activities. Unfortunately, as we all know, this is not the case.

"Risk, Responsibility and Reciprocity" enquires into the various ways in which we can or should be responsible in relation to risks, as well as into the relation of reciprocity to responsibility in times of catastrophes in the 'risk society'. For both responsibility and reciprocity are ways to respond to and to counteract the individualizing effect of risk, which tends to reduce risk management to a personal affair.

## Notes

- 1) Ch. Perrow, *Normal Accidents Living with High-Risk Technologies* (Princeton University Press, 1999); see also J.R. Chiles, *Inviting Disasters Lessons from the Edge of Technology* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2002); C. Perrin, *Shouldering Risk the Culture of Control in the Nuclear Power Energy* (Princeton University Press, 2005); E. Schlosser, *Command and Control. Nuclear Weapons, the Damascus Accident, and the Illusion of Safety* (New York: Penguin Press, 2013)
- 2) U. Beck, *Risk Society Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage Publications, 1992) originally published as *Risikogesellschaft*, 1986.