

Understood Complexity: Ibsen's 'An Enemy of the People'—On Complexity, Sense-Making, Understanding, and Exit/Voice/Loyalty

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'Understood complexity' is a term of Albert Hirschman (1976) whose economic-political theory of 'exit' ('vote with your feet') versus 'voice' (feedback or use your influence for change) (1970), has often been used to (try to) understand whistleblowing (Alford, 2001; Maclagen, 1998). Real complexity is not linear and cannot be adequately studied an model of 'A causes B'. Complexity entails 'A causes B' in a situation wherein 'B causes A'. Bateson in his 'ecology of the mind' understood the circularity of the hermeneutic of complexity; while Weick did not in his theory of sense-making. I argue in this article, via an examination of a play of Ibsen, that circular thinking spiraling towards new insight(s) is much more a possibility of literature (studies) than of social science. Social complexity theory needs (at least partially) I believe to methodologically merge with literary studies.

Introduction: An Enemy of the People: A Drama on Whistleblowing

Literature is an indirect phenomenon. On the one hand, it is a product of the author's artistic imagination; on the other, it represents aspects of our lives and the world in which we live. I will explore Ibsen's representation of complexity in his realistic drama *An enemy of the people* (1882).

The plot takes its point of departure in the discovery that the water at a Spa is polluted and in a concerned employee's unsuccessful attempt to make the management take action to stop the pollution. The plot develops as a case of whistleblowing. Ibsen exposes the organizational response to the whistleblower, resulting in the whistleblower's persecution and in retaliation against him. To my knowledge, the drama is the first literary work to make the

pollution of the environment, the struggle for environmental protection, and whistleblowing, its central issues. My focus is on how Ibsen dealt with the complex (organizational) phenomenon of whistleblowing and making moral sense of it.

Whistleblowing is discussed in major research literature, starting about 100 years after Ibsen wrote his play (Bok, 1981; Elliston *et al.*, 1985; Petersen & Farrall, 1986; Alford, 2001; Johnson, 2002; Bowers *et al.*, 2007; Micely, Near & Dworkin, 2008). There is no consensus either on the term 'whistleblowing' or on the role of morality involved. I understand 'whistleblowing' as an act of an employee to make information on illegitimate practices within an organization known to the responsible management and if necessary going to the public with that information. The whistleblower grapples with 'exit' (to leave the organization and/or avoid conflict) and 'voice' (make the problematic situation known), wherein 'loyalty' (to the organization, to the society at large and/or to one's own morality) plays a major role in what gets decided and/or happens (Hirschman, 1970). Ibsen's drama mirrors in many ways the chaos and complexity of whistleblowing. As a work of dramatic art, the play has a clear plot and a tight structure composed in five acts, which suggests order, balance and meaning. I believe that the harmony of the form helps the reader make sense of the complexity and chaos of the content. The play, I will argue, offers 'understood complexity'.

The drama takes place in a small town at the Norwegian coast. The prosperity of the town is based on the running of a spa—the Baths, which every summer attracts a lot of visitors and patients. The doctor at the Baths suspects that the drinking water is polluted. He sends samples to a university laboratory and his suspicions are verified. He then sends

a report to his superior, the chairman of the board of the Baths, who also is the Mayor of the town. In this report he makes it clear that the water is poisonous and may cause sickness amongst the visitors. The water pipes need to be renewed. He also breaks the bad news to his family and friends, among them Hovstad the editor of the local newspaper, and Aslaksen the representative of the local small businessmen. Both of them declare their support, and assure him that he also will have the majority of the citizens behind him. The Mayor refuses to present the report to the Board and commands the doctor to keep the information to himself. The Mayor approaches Aslaksen and Hovstad, and makes them change their mind about supporting the doctor. The Doctor calls a public meeting to communicate the danger(s). The assembly decides to forbid him to talk about the pollution and declares him an enemy of the people. After the meeting, a mob attacks his home and throws stones through his windows. He is fired; his daughter loses her job; his two young sons are sent home from school. Then the Mayor pays a visit, telling him that he might get his job back if he would only recant and admit his mistake. The Doctor refuses and throws the Mayor out. Having considered immigration to America with his family, he decides to stay and to take care of his son's education himself.

The drama is in five acts and is perfectly symmetrically constructed. In the first act the characters, social environment, and roots of the conflict are introduced. We learn that the water is polluted. The first climax happens in the second act in the discussion between the doctor and the Mayor about the content of the report. The turning point and second climax comes in the middle of the play in the third act, when the doctor in a dramatic and comic confrontation with the Mayor, is deprived of his illusion that he has the community behind him and he realizes that Mayor and his former allies are all now against him. The third and final climax comes in the fourth act, when the doctor at the public meeting is declared an enemy of the people. In the fifth and final act, the thematic threads are collected and the Mayor and the doctor are put to final tests of moral integrity.

An enemy of the people is a one of Ibsen's so-called problem plays, which by some are termed critical realism and by others modern cotemporary drama (Hemmer, 1994). It is commonly read as an exploration into the individual's struggle for truth and justice in opposition to the suppressing forces of society (Bull, 1924; Garton, 1994; Kittang, 2002; Hemmer, 2003). In the historical-biographical context, it is considered to be Ibsen's response to the negative reception of his former play *Ghosts* (1881), and especially as a reaction to the criticism that play received in the liberal press, which Ibsen felt betrayed basic liberal ideas and values (Koht, 1954; Meyer, 1971; de Figueiredo, 2007).

Representing Complexity

HIrshman (1970) has assumed that 'exit' and 'voice' each have their own costs and benefits. If there is too much 'exit', there is no control or feedback and little chance of reform or improvement. If there is too much 'voice', there is constant opposition, conflict and an excess of chaos. If persons are 'loyal'—i.e., ethically committed to their situation, society and/or organization, they will make use of 'voice'. Whistleblowing, thus, can be understood as a product of voice and loyalty. But mis-placed loyalty, and voice out-of-control, can endanger society. Whistleblowing as a calculated strategy of self-enrichment and/or of power grabbing is not explored here. What the play (but not so much the 'plot') has on offer is 'complexity understood'—i.e., the irresolvable complexity of good causing bad, and of bad causing good; or of trust (social involvement) causing conformity, and of social cohesion (belonging) destroying honesty. The play allows the audience to see and (vicariously) experience this complexity; a complexity that (seemingly, from the plot) no one in the drama can consciously grasp. The level of knowing of the 'audience' is principally different from the one that Ibsen attributes to the 'normal citizenry' represented in the play. This paradox of (im-)possible knowing—i.e., of the tension between what (supposedly) is commonly thinkable and what the artist tries to make thinkable in his audience, is crucial to the complexity of

artistic investigation. Art (the play) makes the socially unthinkable, thinkable. And this is exactly what the revealing of complexity requires.

In the following, I do close reading of some key dialogues in the play with the aim of exploring Ibsen's representation of the complex dynamics emerging from moral dilemma(s). Such literary criticism is far more contextual, specific and experiential, than is (normal) social science. Methodologically, I am convinced that this entry into literary criticism is a good way to come close to the study of complexity, which cannot be achieved via linear procedures or abstract methodology. The method has to match the content; the form of writing has to be consistent with what one wants to say. Abstract, generalizing argumentation can hardly represent complexity—it can point to it from somewhere else—i.e., from a linear non-emergent episteme, but it cannot actually be one with it.

The Opening Lines

The opening sequence of a narrative or of a dramatic work, like a first meeting with another person, is often crucial. The opening dialogue—as the first images of a film, or the first stanza of a poem, or the first sentence of fiction—often has the function of cuing the reader to what is to come. Note that I say cuing and not coding; it is a matter of relationship and not of unidirectional information. The first dialogue of Ibsen's play takes place in the doctor's living room, between Mrs. Stockmann the doctor's wife and Mr. Billing a journalist of the *People's Herald* who has come (too late) to dinner. The opening lines:

Evening. DR. STOCKMANN's living room, simply but tastefully furnished. (...)

MRS. STOCKMANN. Well, if you will arrive an hour late, Mr. Billing, you'll have to put up with everything being cold.

BILLING [*eating*]. It's absolutely delicious, really excellent.

MRS. STOCKMANN. You know how strict my husband is about keeping punctually to his mealtimes...

BILLING. It doesn't matter to me in the least. In fact I almost believe it tastes better, sitting down like this to it, alone and undisturbed.

MRS. STOCKMANN. Ah well, as long as you enjoy it... (p. 22).

Nothing much seems to be happening, except small talk about coming too late and the pleasures of eating. What is this journalist doing here? Is he a friend of the house or is he invited as a journalist? He arrives late and does obviously not care very much about etiquette or his hostess' feelings. On the contrary, he seems to take pleasure in coming late and in eating leftovers. Is not cold meat the favorite food of a scavenger—of vultures and hyenas? What kind of person is this journalist? What is his role in the play going to be? We don't know. But Ibsen is certainly cuing the reader' (consciously or unconsciously) to the scavenger scenario, i.e., a possible ecological drama of the survival of the fittest.

The First Act: The Exposition

Ibsen starts in the periphery and little by little exposes the main characters and the core of the conflict. The reader or spectator is given time to mentally tune in and open up to the drama. While talking to Mr. Billing, Mrs. Stockmann suddenly turns towards the hall, and listens. A new visitor is arriving, the Mayor who is also the doctor's brother. In the list of characters he is presented as: 'Peter Stockmann the doctor's elder brother, Mayor, Chief of Police, Chairman of the Board of the Baths, etcetera.' Ibsen describes him in the following way:

[PETER STOCKMANN, the Mayor, enters; he is wearing an overcoat and his mayor's hat, and he carries a stick.] (p. 23).

His attributes—coat and hat, and walking stick—signal protection, position and personal power. The Mayor is the main authority in the small community, a stiff representative of formal position; the Doctor is (seemingly) the opposite. When he receives the test results, the doctor responds spontaneously:

DR. STOCKMANN [waving the letter]. Well! Here's a bit of news that will set a few tongues wagging about the town!

BILLING. News?

Mrs. Stockmann. What news?

DR. STOCKMANN. A great discovery, Kathrine!

Hovstad. Really?

MRS. STOCKMANN. Which you've made?

DR. STOCKMANN. Which I've made, yes. [*Walks up and down.*] Now let them come as they always do, and say it's some madman's crazy idea! Ah, but they'll watch their steps this time! They'll watch out this time, I'll bet. (pp. 36-37)

The doctor's enthusiasm seems to ignore the fact that the water is polluted and that this represents a serious threat both to the health of patients and to the prosperity of the small community. He obviously bears a grudge against somebody and his discovery will be a weapon in his hands: 'they'll watch their steps this time!' Ibsen is unveiling the conflict and its agents. The doctor uses metaphors from his own profession: the Baths are the 'artery', 'nerve centre' and 'throbbing heart' of the town (p. 37). But the discovery of the pollution may turn the imagery around: 'The Baths are nothing but a cesspool', and further:

DR. STOCKMANN. The whole establishment is a whitened poisoned sepulcher, I tell you. A most serious danger to health! All that filth up at Mölledal, where there's such an awful stench—it's all seeping into the pipes that lead into the pump-room. And that same damned, poisonous muck is seeping out on the beach as well. (p. 38)

Act II: The Confrontations

Ibsen delays the confrontation between the doctor and the Mayor, signaling again and again that the Mayor and his associates may not welcome the findings. The doctor however is confident that the Mayor will respond (favorably) to his discovery: 'He can't help but be pleased that an important matter like this has been brought to light, surely' (p. 41). The doctor is a man of science, he knows he is right and

believes firmly that everybody will view the situation like he does. But the doctor's daughter is skeptical. The same goes for his wife and his father-in-law: 'Oh, you should never trust anybody. You can be taken in almost before you know where you are', his father in law says (p. 43); and soon after: 'you'll never get the Mayor to believe a thing like this' (p. 44). The complexity of the matter is also pointed to by the journalist Hovstad who introduces the perspective of politics and power:

HOVSTAD. You said yesterday that the water was contaminated by impurities in the soil.

DR. STOCKMANN. Yes, there's no doubt it all comes from that poisonous swamp up at Mölledal.

HOVSTAD. You'll forgive me, Doctor, but I think it comes from a very different swamp.

Dr. Stockmann. What swamp?

HOVSTAD. The swamp that our whole community is standing rotting in.

DR. STOCKMANN. What kind of damned nonsense is this you're talking, Mr. Hovstad?

HOVSTAD. Everything in this town has gradually found its way into the hands of a certain group of officials . . .

DR. STOCKMANN. Come now, not every one of them is an official.

HOVSTAD. No, but those that aren't officials are friends and hangers-on of those that are—the wealthy ones of the town, and the well-connected. These are the people in control. (p. 47)

Like Hovstad, Aslaksen gives his full support to the doctor, but not on political, but on commercial grounds—i.e., on behalf of the small businessmen and the 'majority' of towns people. Ibsen is continuously feeding the reader with new information, challenging the reader to imagine what the Mayor's reaction might be:

ASLAKSEN. Well then, I've just called to say that I am ready to give every support to a thing like that. (...)

DR. STOCKMANN. That's extremely kind of you, thank you very much; but...

ASLAKSEN. Because you might easily find you need some middle-class support to back you up. We now form what you might call a compact majority here in town—when we really want to, that is. And it's always a good thing to have the majority on your side, Dr. Stockmann.

DR. STOCKMANN. That is undoubtedly true. It's just that I don't quite understand why it should be necessary to take any special measures of that kind here. When it's such an ordinary straightforward thing, it seems to me...

ASLAKSEN. Ah, you never know but what it mightn't be a good thing anyway. I know well enough what the local authorities are like. Those in charge are never very keen on any kind of proposal that *other* people put forward. And that's why I think it wouldn't be a bad thing if we made a bit of a demonstration. (p. 49)

What to the doctor seems like a practical problem related to a dysfunctional water system emerges gradually to the reader (audience) as a possible matter of politics, power and personal pride. But the doctor does not see any danger, insisting 'it'll be all plain sailing', 'nothing but plain sailing!' (p. 52). In other words, Ibsen has created his main character as the archetypical whistleblower who—according to research more than a century later—'reports malpractice in the belief that senior management will be grateful for the information' (Rothschild & Miethe 1999). Not until the second part of Act II does Ibsen reveal the Mayor's response. By postponing the confrontation and cuing the reader to imagine what the Mayor's response will be, Ibsen creates dramatic and moral tension. The first confrontation is a test of morality:

DR. STOCKMANN. Yes. Surely you are also convinced yourself by now!

MAYOR. Is it your intention to present this document to the Board as an official report?

DR. STOCKMANN. Of course. Something will have to be done about this thing. And quick. (p. 53)

The Mayor fails this first test. He is indifferent to the heart of the matter—the pollution and its threat to the patients' health; and instead focuses on procedure and form:

MAYOR. I received from you yesterday, after office hours, a report concerning the state of the water at the Baths.

DR. STOCKMANN. Yes. Have you read it?

MAYOR. Yes, I have.

DR. STOCKMANN. And what have you got to say about it?

MAYOR. [*with a sidelong glance*]. Hm . . . [*after a pause*]. Was it necessary to make all these investigations behind my back?

DR. STOCKMANN. Yes, until I know with absolute certainty . . .

MAYOR. And now you do, you mean?

DR. STOCKMANN. Yes. Surely you are also convinced yourself by now! (...)

MAYOR. As usual, you use some rather emphatic expressions in your report. Among other things, you say that what we offer our summer visitors is sheer poison.

DR. STOCKMANN. Well, Peter, what else can you call it? Just think! That water's poison whether you drink it or bathe in it! And this is what we offer those poor invalids who come to us in good faith and pay good money hoping to get their health back!

MAYOR. And then you conclude by stating we must build a sewer to deal with these alleged impurities from Mölledal, and that the present water pipes must be re-laid.

DR. STOCKMANN. Well, can you suggest any other solution? I can't. (pp. 53-54)

By reducing the pollution to 'alleged impurities,' the Mayor contests the scientific evidence, trivializing the matter, and downplaying the possible implications. While the doctor's project is ethical—he wants to do something about the problem and to protect the patients, the Mayor appears to have something quite different in mind. The Mayor's primary concern seems to be financial. According to him, repairs will be expensive and the work will take at least two years:

DR. STOCKMANN. Two years, eh? Two whole years?

MAYOR. At least. And what's to be done with the Baths in the meantime? Shall we shut them? We'll have to. You don't think people are going to come all the way here if the rumor got around that the water was polluted?

DR. STOCKMANN. But Peter, that's what it is.

MAYOR. And all this has to come out just when the Baths were beginning to pay their way. A lot of other places in the district could equally well develop into health resorts. Can't you see they would set to work at once to divert all our tourist traffic to themselves. Of course they would; no doubt whatever. And we'd be left sitting there with all that expensive plant on our hands; we'd probably have to abandon the entire project. The whole town would be ruined, thanks to you!

DR. STOCKMANN. Me...? Ruined...? (p. 54-55)

Again Ibsen puts the Mayor to a moral test. Does he want to do something about the problem or not? The Mayor is afraid of the negative consequences for the Bath's image and accordingly for the profits and the prosperity of the town. In contemporary terms, he practices organizational ecology (Hannan & Freeman, 1989) and fears firm mortality. When the doctor insists on sticking to the truth, the Mayor responds by blaming the messenger. Again he fails the moral test. The Mayor denies the facts, downplays the seriousness of the matter, and tries to shift the moral responsibility. And when this does not do the trick, the Mayor questions the doctor's professional competence and integrity:

MAYOR. As I said before, I think you exaggerate considerably. Any competent doctor would surely be able to meet this situation—take some suitable precautionary measures and treat any noticeable injurious effects, if there actually turned out to be any.

DR. STOCKMANN. Well? And what then?

MAYOR. The existing water-supply of the Baths is now an established fact, and must be treated as such. (p. 55)

The Mayor's defense of the status quo trumps both truth and morality. The Mayor is a representative of moral neglect, who challenges the reader to moral reflection. Concern for organization and prosperity is represented by the Mayor and concern for the health of the patients and the citizens is represented by the doctor. The reader is left in the middle, trying to understand why the Mayor is turning a deaf ear to the moral concerns and insists on doing (almost) nothing:

MAYOR. (...) But it is reasonable to suppose that in time the Directors might not be disinclined to consider how far, in the light of the prevailing financial situation, it would be possible to initiate certain improvements.

DR. STOCKMANN. Do you honestly think I would lend myself to that sort of sharp practice?

MAYOR. Sharp practice?

DR. STOCKMANN. Sharp practice, yes! That's what it would be. A swindle, a fraud, an absolute crime against the public and against society!

MAYOR. As I remarked earlier, I have not been able to persuade myself that there is any actual imminent danger.

DR. STOCKMANN. Oh yes, you have! You couldn't help it. My report is absolutely correct and clear, I know that! And you know it too, Peter, but you won't admit it. You were the one responsible for having the Baths and the water-supply sited where they are now. And it's *this*—this damned blunder of yours—that you won't admit. Puh! Do you think I can't see right through you?

MAYOR. And even if that were so? Even if I may seem to guard my reputation somewhat jealously, it's all for the good of the town. (pp. 56-57)

This is not just a question of organizational ecology or the ability to compete. Defending the status quo by blaming the Doctor and questioning his integrity, are evidently the Mayor's way of protecting himself from a (past) serious mistake. But the doctor—at least to a certain degree—seems to enjoy being able to point to the Mayor's 'damned blunder' and 'tremendous piece of stupidity.' Corporate

social responsibility involves responding adequately to an ethical dilemma, which entails organizational ecology as well as the psychology of leadership. In the play's case, moral neglect or deficiency operates as a—conscious or unconscious—strategy of self-protection, defending the self from shame and the risk of social condemnation or degradation. The whistleblower's moral flaw is in his disposition for arrogance, hubris, and perhaps also vindictiveness. Both the Mayor's leadership and the whistleblower's morality are problematic. Having unveiled the Mayor's personal interest in keeping the information secret, Ibsen continues by exposing the Mayor's rationale for obstructing and counteracting transparency:

MAYOR. (...) Without some measure of moral authority, I should not be able to guide and direct public affairs in the way I consider best serves the common weal. Therefore—and for various other reasons—I consider it imperative that your report should not be presented to the Board. In the public interest, it must be withheld. Then I shall bring the matter up later, and we'll do all we can privately. But nothing, not a single word, of this disastrous business must be made public. (p. 56)

In exposing the Mayor's hypocrisy, Ibsen makes use of dramatic irony, i.e., the technique of letting the audience perceive underlying significances that are not apparent to the characters themselves. The Mayor pretends—or believes—to act in the best interest of the town, while the reader knows that he is acting out of self-interest. The conflict continues with the doctor refusing to give in to the Mayor's demands. This represents yet another moral test to the Mayor, which he fails:

DR. STOCKMANN. My dear Peter, I doubt if we can prevent that now.

MAYOR. It must and shall be prevented.

DR. STOCKMANN. It's no use, I tell you. Too many people know about it already.

MAYOR. Know about it already? Who? I only hope it's not those people on the *Herald*. . . ?

DR. STOCKMANN. Oh yes, they know already. The progressive and independent press will see to

it that you do your duty.

MAYOR [*after a short pause*]. You are an astonishingly indiscreet man, Thomas! Did you never think what consequences this might have for you personally?

DR. STOCKMANN. Consequences? For me?

MAYOR. For you and your family (p. 56)

The Mayor responds with subtle threats to the Doctor and his family. When the Doctor shows no sign of changing his mind, the Mayor appeals to his loyalty: 'You seem to forget that it's me you have to thank for your appointment here as medical officer to the Baths...' (p. 56). And when the Doctor does not respond, the Mayor becomes explicit:

MAYOR. Since you have been so indiscreet as to discuss this delicate matter with certain unauthorized persons—despite the fact that it should have been treated as a matter confidential to the Board—things can of course no longer be hushed up. All sorts of rumors will spread, and the more spiteful ones among us can be relied on to embellish them with all sorts of extras. It will therefore be necessary for you to make a public denial of these rumors.

DR. STOCKMANN. For me! How? I don't understand you.

MAYOR. We shall expect you, after making further investigations, to come to the conclusion that the matter is not by any means as dangerous or as serious as you in the first instance imagined it to be.

DR. STOCKMANN. Aha! So that's what you expect, is it?

MAYOR. Furthermore we shall expect you to make a public declaration of your confidence in the Board, in its efficiency and its integrity, and in its readiness to take all necessary steps to remedy such defects as may arise. (p. 58)

There are echoes here of Galileo and the abjuration enforced upon him. The Mayor's threats, force, and denial of facts are meant to make the Board seem trustworthy. By letting the Mayor put pressure on the doctor, Ibsen exposes the Doctor's moral integrity to test-

ing. Unlike the Mayor, the doctor passes the test. He refuses to give in:

DR. STOCKMANN. Yes, but don't you see, you'll never do anything just by fiddling with the problem, hoping to patch things up. I'm telling you straight Peter, and I', absolutely and utterly convinced...

MAYOR. As an employee you have no right to any private opinion.

DR. STOCKMANN [falters]. No right...?

MAYOR. As an employee, I mean. As a private individual—good Lord, yes, that's quite different. But as a subordinate member of the staff of the Baths, you have no right to express any opinions that conflicts with that of your superiors. (...)

DR. STOCKMANN. And supposing I don't . . . obey?

MAYOR. Then we shall ourselves issue a statement to reassure the public.

DR. STOCKMANN. Indeed. Well, then I shall contradict you in the newspapers. I shall stand up for myself. I shall prove that I'm right and you're wrong. And then what will you do?

MAYOR. Then I shall not be able to prevent you from being dismissed. (pp. 58-60)

Ibsen's Mayor increasingly represents the corruption of mind by threatening the doctor with dismissal and soon after appealing to the Doctor's wife to try to make the Doctor change his mind—implicitly threatening her with dire consequences for the whole family. Whistleblowing results from the Mayor's refusal to listen and effort to suppress the truth:

DR. STOCKMANN. I'm the one with the real best welfare of the town at heart! All I want to do is expose certain things that are bound to come out sooner or later anyway. Oh, I'll show them whether I love this town or not.

MAYOR. All you are really doing, by your sheer blind obstinacy, is cutting off the main source of the town's prosperity.

DR. STOCKMANN. That source is poisoned, man! Are you mad! We live by peddling filth and

corruption! The whole of town's prosperity is rooted in a lie!

MAYOR. Fantastic nonsense—or worse! Any man who can cast such aspersions against his own birthplace is nothing but a public enemy. (p. 60-61)

Ibsen dramatizes two conflicting rationales; on the one hand there is the organizational concern for profit and organizational survival; and on the other, the professional concern for the health of the patients and citizens. But at the same time, Ibsen also explores underlying conflicting psychological and existential motives interfering with and sabotaging these (simple) moral concerns. The Mayor needs to protect himself from losing face and the doctor takes pleasure in being right. With this complexity, Ibsen exposes whistleblowing as an emergent phenomenon that cannot be simply modeled.

Act III: Organizational Sense-Changing

During the first two acts, Ibsen exposed the conflict central to the play. On the one hand, we find the doctor and his allies, the free press and the representatives of the citizenry. And on the other hand, we find the Mayor and the representatives of the leading citizens, and their organizational power. The third act is staged in the editorial office of the local newspaper. Ibsen starts out by exposing the Doctor's fighting spirit and the enthusiasm of his supporters when they learn that he has decided to blow the whistle:

HOVSTAD [*crosses to him*]. Ah, it's you, Doctor. Well?

DR. STOCKMANN. Print it, Mr. Hovstad!

HOVSTAD. Has it come to that?

BILLING. Hurrah!

DR. STOCKMANN. Print away, I tell you. Yes, it *has* come to that. Now they're going to get what's coming to them. This is war, Mr. Billing! (p. 65)

Billing, the radical journalist, finds the report 'absolutely devastating', like a 'blow from a sledge-hammer'; he can almost hear

'the revolution coming' (p. 64). Likewise, editor Hovstad finds the report an 'absolute masterpiece' and will print it immediately (p. 65). Aslaksen, the representative of the small businessmen of the town declares the Doctor 'a true benefactor to the town, a real benefactor to society' (p. 68). The Doctor may be an enemy of society to the Mayor, but he is a hero to Aslaksen and the journalist. But the Mayor has no intention of giving in. He decides to pay a visit to the newspaper's editorial office and approaches the Doctor's allies. He starts with Hovstad, the editor:

MAYOR [*looking about him*]. You've settled yourself in here nice and comfortably. Very nice.

HOVSTAD. Oh . . .

MAYOR. And here I come without any appointment, and proceed to take up all your precious time.

HOVSTAD. *Please, Mr. Mayor, I'm only too delighted to be of service. Let me take your things. [He puts the MAYOR's hat and stick on a chair.]* Now, won't you sit down?

MAYOR [*sits at the table*]. Thank you.

[HOVSTAD also sits down at the table]

MAYOR. I have an extremely disagreeable matter to deal with today, Mr. Hovstad.

HOVSTAD. Really? Of course, with so many things to see to . . .

MAYOR. This particular matter has been raised by the Medical Officer of the Baths.

HOVSTAD. By the Doctor?

MAYOR. He's written a kind of report about a number of alleged shortcomings at the Baths, and sent it to the Board.

HOVSTAD. Has he? (p. 75)

The Mayor excuses himself for taking the editor's time and offers to share a personal unpleasant experience of his. *Self-disclosure* or *self-sharing* is an efficient strategy for building trust and creating personal alliances and loyalty. The mayor's seemingly humble and almost pleasing attitude, downplays his authority, making him look much less of an antagonist than he really is. By letting the editor put away

the Mayor's *attributes of power*—his hat and stick, Ibsen signals to the reader that the Mayor's strategy is working. The conflicts of political interest are being put aside and a new alliance is born. With the symbols, Ibsen reminds the reader who the Mayor really is—a man of power with means of retaliation and punishment. Again dramatic irony is used to expose the Mayor's slyness or falsehood; he refers to the doctor's report as 'a kind of report' and talks about 'alleged shortcomings'. The reader (audience) knows that the report is based on conscientious scientific testing. The Mayor is a strategic and manipulative communicator. Having got the editor on his side, he tackles Mr. Aslaksen approaching him in a friendly, flattering, almost intimate way to get his message through, namely that he has everything to lose by staying loyal to the Doctor:

MAYOR. If all these extensive alterations are considered desirable, the town itself must pay for them. (...) The most ruinous thing is that we'll be forced to close the Baths for a couple of years.

ASLAKSEN. Yes, but Heavens! We could never last out that long, Mr. Mayor. What would people like us live on in the meantime? (pp. 77-78)

After having actualized Aslaksen's self-interest as a businessman, the Mayor can undermine his loyalty to the Doctor.

MAYOR. I regret to say that is an extremely difficult question to answer, Mr. Aslaksen. But what do you expect us to do? Do you think anybody is going to come here if you get people going around making up these stories about the water being polluted, and about the place being a cesspool, and the whole town...

ASLAKSEN. Do you think the whole thing might just be imagination?

MAYOR. With the best will in the world, I cannot come to any other conclusion.

ASLAKSEN. Then I must say Dr. Stockmann is being a most irresponsible in all this. You must forgive me, Mr. Mayor, but...

MAYOR. I regret what you say is quite true, Mr. Aslaksen. My brother has always been rather impetuous, unfortunately. (p. 78)

The Baths may be polluted, but self-interest is powerful. The Mayor is a powerful schemer, capable of undermining the doctor's allies' commitment by lies and slander. Having established the conception of the doctor as untrustworthy, the Mayor takes communicative control of the situation, offering the editor a written statement.

ASLAKSEN. Are you still prepared to support him after this, Mr. Hovstad?

HOVSTAD. But who would have thought...?

MAYOR. I have drawn up a short statement of the facts, putting a rather more sober interpretation on them; and in it I have suggested some ways in which such defects as may come to light could reasonably be dealt with without going beyond the present resources of the Baths.

HOVSTAD. Have you this statement with you, Mr. Mayor?

MAYOR [*fumbling in his pocket*]. Yes, I brought it with me on the off-chance that... (p. 78)

With a series of small strategic moves, the Mayor succeeds in turning both morality and reality upside down, and in making the doctor seem completely irresponsible. Having prevented the publication of the doctor's report, the Mayor makes his own statement. The process is displayed of making a lie into an official truth. In the climax, which is the turning point of the play, the doctor realizes what the audience already knows, namely that the citizenry are now all against him. No one will print his article. The doctor is furious:

DR. STOCKMANN. You think you can gag me and silence the truth! You'll not get away with this so easily. Mr. Aslaksen, will you please take my manuscript and print it for me at once as a pamphlet—at my own expense, and on my authority. I want four hundred copies—no, five ... six hundred, I want.

ASLAKSEN. Not if you offered me its weight in gold could I let my printing press be used for a thing like that. I daren't offend public opinion. You'll not get anybody in town to print this, I shouldn't think. (p. 84)

The representative of leadership and power is on the winning hand. The whistleblower is discredited, his actions are considered irresponsible, people are afraid of being associated with him, and he is denied every possibility of making his views known. Sense has (been) changed—true seems false, responsible action seems irresponsible, responsibility seems a threat to society. Not only the representatives of power are involved, but also the average citizens silently consent or actively contribute to what is going on. Ibsen lets the Doctor call a mass meeting: 'All my fellow citizens shall hear the voice of truth!' (p. 85). In other words, the Mayor's task of silencing the Doctor is not quite completed yet.

Act IV: Taking Control Of Public Opinion

In Act IV Ibsen stages the confrontation between the doctor and the people of the town. A big crowd of townspeople has turned out. The Mayor arrives late, 'eases his way through the crowd, bowing politely' (p. 89). The Mayor insists that the meeting needs a chairman and proposes Aslaksen who he knows will be his loyal representative. Having secured his power position, the Mayor is ready for his following step, preventing the Doctor from speaking:

MAYOR. Mr. Chairman!

ASLAKSEN. Yes, Mr. Mayor.

MAYOR. In view of the close relationship which, as is doubtless well known, exists between me and the present Medical Officer of the Baths, I should have much preferred not to speak this evening. But my connections with the Baths, to say nothing of my concern for the vital interests of the town, compel me to put forward some sort of proposal. I think I may safely assume that not a single one of us present here today wants to see irresponsible and exaggerated accounts put about concerning the sanitary conditions at the Baths and in the town generally.

MANY VOICES. No, no! Certainly not! We protest!

MAYOR. I should like to propose, therefore, that the Medical Officer be not permitted by this meeting to present his account of the matter.

DR. STOCKMANN [*flaring up*]. Not permitted! What is this...?

MRS. STOCKMANN [*coughing*]. Hm! hm!

DR. STOCKMANN [*composing himself*]. Ah! Not permitted, eh!

MAYOR. In my communication to the *People's Herald*, I acquainted the public with some relevant facts, and every right-thinking person can quite well form his own opinion. It clearly shows that the Doctor's proposal—apart from being a vote of censure on the leading citizens of the town—simply means saddling the ratepayers with an unnecessary expenditure of at least several thousand crowns.

[Cries of disapproval, and whistles.] (p. 91)

The Mayor has put a person he trusts in the chair, obstructed the Doctor from giving his lecture, and deprived the Doctor of credibility by branding his accounts as 'irresponsible and exaggerated' and calling the reparation costs an 'unnecessary expenditure'. The Mayor drives a wedge of self-interest between the crowd and the Doctor with the image of the Doctor, as a threat to society's 'vital interests'. And the crowd responds with a spontaneous condemnation of the Doctor as an enemy of the people:

A MAN [*in the crowd*]. That's the talk of an enemy of the people!

BILLING. That, God damn me, was the voice of the people!

THE WHOLE CROWD [*shouting*]. Yes! Yes! He's an enemy of the people. He hates his country. He hates his people. (p. 102)

The Doctor is expelled from the community and is unable to make his voice heard. The Mayor has achieved his aim. Truth is defeated. The concept of 'pollution' no longer refers to a quality of the drinking water, but now to the society as a whole:

DR. STOCKMANN. I am going to make a great exposure, gentlemen! And the revelation I am going to make to you is incomparably bigger than this petty business about the water-supply being polluted and the Baths standing over a cesspool.

SEVERAL VOICES [*shouting*]. Don't talk about the Baths! We don't want to hear it! None of that!

DR. STOCKMANN. I have said I am going to speak about the tremendous discovery I have made in the last few days ... the discovery that all our spiritual sources are polluted and that our whole civic community is built over a cesspool of lies. (p. 93)

The concrete (water) has become the symbolic (truthfulness and moral responsibility) and the interrelationship of the two is asserted.

Act V: Final Steps To Corruption Of Mind

The decor for the final act is in the doctor's home. The crowd has smashed the windows—stones and glass are spread on the floor and the landlord has given notice. The Doctor's daughter Petra has been fired from her job as a teacher, and the two young boys have been thrown out of school, all the results of public opinion. Then, the Mayor shows up:

MAYOR. If I may give you some advice, it's this: go away for some while...

DR. STOCKMANN. Yes, I had actually been thinking of going away.

MAYOR. Good. And after you'd had six months or so to think things over, and if after mature consideration you then felt you were ready to write a few words of apology, admitting your mistake...

DR. STOCKMANN. Then I might perhaps get my job back again, you mean?

MAYOR. Perhaps. It's not altogether impossible. (p. 113)

Ibsen puts both the Mayor and the Doctor to a final moral test. So far the Mayor has won both the struggle for power and of sense-making. With a few exceptions, everyone per-

ceives the doctor as a public enemy. He has lost his job, so he is not a threat to anyone anymore. Nevertheless, the Mayor proposes a piece of horse-trading—trying one more time to bribe the Doctor into abjuration. As before, the doctor refuses to give-in. Appealing to his economic responsibility for his family, does not do the trick. The Mayor makes a final attempt to force the Doctor to play by his rules. But the Doctor refuses. The only thing he has left is his moral integrity. And he does not compromise, despite pressure, retaliation, persecution, vandalism, dismissals and repeated attempts at bribery and corruption. Instead, the Doctor throws the Mayor out of the house and concludes that ‘the strongest man in the world is the man who stands most alone’.

Understanding Complexity

Bateson understood the ecology of the mind (1972) in terms of how reality produces text, just as much as how text (concepts / assumptions) produces reality, and how circumstances (for instance, human evolution) produce consciousness just as much as how consciousness (perception) produces circumstances. In the play, ‘pollution’ is a quality of nature and of mind, where the two are ironic, complementary, causal, and in conflict. This is an aspect of the complexity of the play. To use complexity terminology, the play’s logic is a ‘strange attractor’. It is very uncertain what the social and moral system leads to. There are many ecologies here: there is the environmental ecology of the pollution of the water, there is the organizational ecology of the Baths trying to survive within their competitive environment, there is the social ecology of wealth, profit, and power, and there is the moral ecology of responsibility and ‘truth-telling’. The pollution of the drinking water develops into a metaphor for the moral corruption of society and of its representatives. In his article on Ibsen and organization, Sørhaug concludes:

Science has a lot to learn from art regarding the handling of complexities and contradictions (Engelstad, 2006). In its depiction of social processes, aesthetic judgment is more able than scientific calculation to perceive and retain

the combinations of emotionality and rationality and to generalize without losing specificity. Science has a tendency to erase contradictions, ‘solve’ paradoxes and simplify complexity. Art has an adverse tendency to develop contradictions and to explore and exploit complexity. The art of science is committed to a theoretical and methodological rigor, but it is in need of an aesthetical supplement preserving the sense of complexity and keeping an eye on ‘the sources of novelty’. Without an active aesthetic supplement, science may lose out on both reality and the emergent (Sørhaug, 2007: 1294).

Weick’s sense-making rejects Bateson’s complex hermeneutic, and stresses the pragmatic value of ‘knowing where you are’, even if the map is ‘not the right one’ (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). Weick assumes that the subject has to ‘know’—in sense-making one has to ‘know’ where one is. If ‘reality’ seems ambiguous, emergent or paradoxical, ‘sense-making’ will be retrospectively needed (applied) to stabilize and make it knowable. Ibsen has no trust in any such sense-making, or in socially desirable or sanctioned ‘truth’. What complexity (theory) has to offer is the realization that socially motivated retrospective labeling may not do justice to motives, circumstances or evolving change. Weick in effect prescribes some sort of socially anchored nominalism wherein the subject(s) decide(s) what ‘is’, based on their (pragmatic) need(s) to know. Ibsen clearly tries to debunk such ethical opportunism.

Hirschman’s theory of ‘exit, voice and loyalty’ (1970) is here illuminative. The Doctor had indeed to face such forces: does he stay in the community or leave, does he have and/or can he achieve ‘voice’, to what is he (ultimately) loyal? But these terms do not coalesce into a simple system—they remain dynamic, emergent and operate as strange attractors. The basic themes of moral responsibility and truth, and the resulting actions, thoughts and results, remain ethically unresolved. The Mayor retains his social authority however dishonest his actions may be and the Doctor stays on the moral high ground however compromised he is by vanity and/or revenge. But the ambivalence of

good and evil, morality and effectiveness, self-interest and common good, remains.

In Ibsen's play the representation of whistleblowing and the ethical processes involved are ambiguous and complex. As Sørhaug puts it, art has a tendency to develop contradictions and to explore and exploit complexity. However creating a work of art implies more than exploring and exploiting complexity. There are formal aspects to art as well. Complexity needs a form actualizes and represents difference and recognition, unity and chaos, familiarity and strangeness. The work of literary art understood as a strange attractor, offers a form or structure for the representing of complexity as a series of 'points' in language. To some extent, these 'points' challenge the reader (audience) to co-create and discover moral phenomena not easily otherwise seen or reflected upon. I have touched upon four such formal and/or structural elements in the play: composition, dramatic irony, the use of metaphor ('pollution') and the ethical method of putting the main character to moral tests leaving moral reflection and judgment to the reader (Eide, 2001, 2004).

So what might (social) science learn from this? Ibsen does not give any answers. On the contrary, he is continuously raising questions, exploring complexities, (re)presenting ambiguities and challenging moral intuitions and assumptions. On the one hand, a researcher might learn a lot from the author's attitude (tolerating complexity, chaos) and methods (expressing contradiction, paradox, emergence). On the other hand, the work of art (play) might be considered to be a mimetic (Aristotle) investigation into a complex reality, including representation of how things are (or are not) linked together. The work of art may be considered a source of theory; for instance, what Ibsen's *An enemy of the people* tells us about the phenomenon of whistleblowing.

Seven Steps to Corruption of Mind

Taking Ibsen's method of putting his main characters to moral tests as a point of departure, it seems that the text is built around a succession of test cases (practical situations) on the one hand, and moral values (truth and moral

responsibility) on the other. The question is whether one lives up to the moral standards of truthfulness and moral responsibility, or not. The text does not give any simple answers. The reader (audience) is the moral judge. The text appeals indirectly to the reader's sense of truth and morality. In the following I will briefly summarize the Mayor's moral tests and give a brief 'translation' of the 'answers' given by his actions. These are so many steps to the corruption of the mind. I see seven such steps:

1. This test entails how to respond to a message of organizational malpractice? One starts with turning a deaf ear to the problem. Keywords are moral inertia and indifference. One overlooks moral cues, shows no interest in information and keeps a safe distance from the matter in question;
2. This test involves how to respond if the strategy of indifference does not make the problem go away and the informant insists on having voice? You reject the information and refuse to listen. If necessary, one contradicts the facts and plays down any possible negative implications. A possible follow-up strategy is to blame the messenger;
3. This test centers on how to respond if simple information rejection does not work? One argues all the stronger against taking action and against change. All arguments that work are used, whether true or false. Try to convince others that everything is going to be OK; appeal to their sense of community and loyalty. Try 'you are one of us' and 'we are here to help each other,' and the 'what I expect of you', strategies. If argumentation and appeals to loyalty do not work, appeal to self-interest;
4. This test examines how to respond if appeals to rationality and loyalty do not work? One can try threats and intimidation. Even if the messenger may seem ethically confident, he (she) probably has some weak spots. Try to threaten her (him) with the loss of respect and of reputation. That will put his (her) self esteem to the test. You can threaten to fire her (him). Make it clear that

he (she) will lose position, income and the ability to taking care of family. Threaten personal freedom and put close relations at risk. A possible follow-up strategy is to try to bribery;

5. This test focuses on how to respond if threats and intimidation do not work? One can organize campaigns and turn her (his) colleagues against her (him). See to it that lateral communication canals are closed. Deny voice; make it impossible for her (him) to speak. Isolate him (her) in the workplace, and make him (her) into 'not one of us'. If this does not work, try dismissal;
6. This test aims at how to act if not even dismissal makes the problem disappear? Retaliation and persecution may be necessary. Create rumors, slander and make her (his) motives look fishy and self-interested. Talk to everybody and see to it that she (he) does not get a new job. If sanctions against her (his) family are within reach, fine. Attacks on private property might make him (her) change his (her) mind and attitude, and;
7. This final test asks how to act if nothing works, nothing at all? Stick to the status quo; what 'is' (or has been) is 'True'. Do whatever is needed to avoid change, whatever that might be. When step 1 to 6 are tried without success, wait some time and try again. Do as if you wanted the best for the whistleblower and give her (him) a new chance on the condition that she (he) will change her (his) mind.

Does this imply that ethical processes are linear after all? As dramatized by Ibsen, each of these steps towards the corruption of the mind is based on conscious or unconscious decision—(im)moral choices guided by self-interest and/or a need for the protection of self. Such a psychological interpretation may be valid. This is a question of perspective and of the reader's ability to embrace the complexity of the text, which surely also has other elements (like those of organizational ecology). Turning to the other main character, the Doctor or the

moral 'hero' of the play, the question remains to whom or to what does he stay loyal. Why does he choose voice above exit, and why is he not successful in causing change when he has the scientific 'truth' of 'pollution' on his side. Neither protagonist accepts complexity; they are both locked into their own (linear) logic, and proceed blindly (like a tragic hero) from a basic (fixed) assumption to their fate.

The argument for complexity is grounded in the ambiguity of the play's form and language, not in its characters or plot. Ibsen's constant use of dramatic irony is complex, like the moral tests and his use of metaphor. The playwright and the audience share awareness complexity. Here we find a dynamic aggregate of interacting parts or components triggered by difference. But we need motivation, moral imagination, determination and intellectual hard work to see, understand and position ourselves vis-à-vis the complex chains of moral challenge, choice and action.

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