

Preface

In order to survive and prosper, almost every business in our global economy has to make use of new and evolving information technologies. This starts with the local baker who needs a telephone to be able to contact his suppliers or customers, and ends with the international virtual Internet business that exists solely in virtual reality. The use of information technology affects many aspects of our private and business life. It leads to changes in routines, new ways of understanding our environment, new distributions of power, money, and influence. The changes are sufficiently severe to warrant speaking of a new technological revolution. Like every other revolution this one will produce winners and losers, proponents and opponents. Whatever else one may think of this development, it is hard to deny that it is ethically relevant. Old forms of morality seem to lose their validity while new ways of communicating and living together emerge.

The strongest motor of these developments seems to be the economic system. Especially the impact of economic interests on the Internet is an indication of this. The Internet, introduced by the U.S. military and subsequently used mainly for scientific exchange of data has, in the last few years become a major application for all sorts of businesses. This has met the resistance of many old users of the Net, but the economic interests appear to outweigh these by far. The theoretical advantages of the Internet for businesses, the decrease of transaction costs, the incredible market reach, the unknown possibilities of communicating and interacting with all sorts of business partners have propelled the Internet and its related technologies to the top space in the interest of businesses. A sign of the economy's enthusiasm for the Internet was the dot.com bubble. Even after the bubble burst, however, the economic promises of new information technologies seem stunning.

Economic interest in the new technologies will most probably not change in the near future, and it is a safe bet that the economy will increase its drive

towards new technologies. It is just as safe a bet that this will aggravate existing moral problems and at the same time create new ones. The purpose of this book is therefore to analyse the ethical and moral questions that new technologies and especially their use in businesses and the economy produce. As the central concept of this discussion, this book will use the notion of responsibility. Responsibility is a term especially suited for the job of discussing ethical questions in business and technology. There are several structural similarities between the three terms responsibility, business, and technology. Also, the acceptance of responsibility in business as well as in technological settings allows analyses that might otherwise be resented by the affected persons. Managers and technical personnel often react negatively to moral claims because they do not feel that their work is subject to ethical scrutiny. On the other hand, every manager and every technician will agree that he or she has responsibilities.

We will therefore start this book by defining the concepts of information systems and business information technology. The term “information systems” is used in the academic world to denote the intersection of ICT and social entities, usually companies or other formal organisations. Information systems research tends to focus on the social impact of technology or the influence the social has on the use of technology. Academic information systems departments are often located in schools of business which is a good indicator that they are well-positioned to address the different aspects of the social, the ethical, and the technical that are at the heart of this book. The connection between these aspects can most easily be made by analysing the underlying concepts of business, information, and technology, which are combined in information systems.

Following this initial introduction to the subject area, we will then proceed to give an introduction to normative problems by contrasting the terms ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’ in the light of different philosophical traditions. On the basis of the understanding of normative questions developed in this chapter, we will then investigate why responsibility is a concept that seems to offer solutions to ethical and moral problems of business information technology.

A subsequent deeper analysis of the concept of responsibility will show, however, that there are severe problems with the application of responsibility to concrete questions in information systems. Based on this analysis we will then develop a reflective notion of responsibility that emphasises the communicational character of the ascription that constitutes responsibility. It also takes seriously the openness, teleology, and consequentialism of responsibility and asks what is responsible about the use of the concept of responsibility. In a final section we will use this reflective notion of responsibility and apply it to

business information technology using the important problem of privacy and employee surveillance as an example. It will be shown that responsibility is an inevitable fact of the business use of IT and that the reflective turn of the concept can offer solutions where a traditional approach to responsibility fails.

At this stage it is probably useful to add a few words on the content, scope, and readership of the book. Most people who live in the information society, meaning in western market economies, have encountered moral problems caused by the use of ICT. Many of us will be aware that the changes of the structure in society and business triggered by ICT can have ethical implications. We all know the concept of responsibility, and many of us may be wondering what it means to be responsible with regards to ICT or information systems. In this sense the readership of the book potentially encompasses most of the citizens of the modern world. In a more confined sense, the book will probably be of interest specifically to those people who have an interest in information systems and more specifically in the ethical side of them. This would include academics, be it students or teachers, who are active in the areas of computer ethics, information ethics, etc. It should also be of interest to information systems practitioners who are faced with the ethical impacts of the use of ICT.

To those potential readers who are looking for quick solutions or clear instructions on how to be responsible, a caveat should be added. This book attempts to develop a well-grounded theory of responsibility that is based on the philosophical discourse about ethics. Given that this discourse in its academic form is already 2,500 years old, and that beyond that it is part of every human's experience, it will not be possible to condense this into clear algorithms. The subject of ethics has proven to be highly resistant to unified approaches, and no universally accepted ethical principle exists. This book attempts to use this moral plurality as a starting point and uses the inevitability of responsibility ascriptions as an argument for suggestions on which action can be based despite their fallibility. The idea is thus to produce a theory of responsibility that can live up to philosophical scrutiny, and that can at the same time give indications as to how individuals could or should act. Due to this aim of theoretical and philosophical acceptability, the level of discussion always remains above the level of action. The theory of reflective responsibility developed in this book cannot tell us what to do, but it tries to tell us how we can find out what the responsible thing to do is.

This approach may lead to frustration by those readers who expect quick fixes and easy answers. Unfortunately, however, quick fixes and easy answers are not part of what ethics is about, and they are not to be expected with regards to normative problems. While the book will ideally be eminently prac-

tical in that it allows the reader to develop a new perspective on responsibility and consequently new forms of actions and their justifications, it is not practical in the sense of a “how to...” book. On the other hand, information systems is a practical discipline that addresses problems of ICT as they arise in organisational practice. In order to cater to this practicality of the subject area, the book works with a number of examples. These examples are meant to demonstrate what problems can be and how, according to the theory of reflective responsibility, they can be addressed. The reader will hopefully find that walking the tightrope of theoretical stringency on the one hand and practical applicability and understandability on the other has been achieved to his or her advantage.