

Chapter VII

Conclusion

The use of computers and information technology in businesses and the economy can lead to normative problems. These moral, ethical, legal, or other problems can be expressed in terms of responsibility. The idea of this book was to analyse what responsibility in relation to business information technology can mean. It was shown that responsibility is a normative term that can be placed between the ideas of ethics and morality. It combines the theoretical and the practical approach that we find in the German tradition, and it can mediate between deontology and teleology in the French tradition. A closer analysis of the literature concerning responsibility showed that there are several aspects that combine the different theories of responsibility. Among them we identified openness, an affinity to action, and teleology.

In the light of these three general meanings of responsibility, the term was applied to itself in order to see whether the notion of responsibility itself can be helpful in dealing with responsibility problems. It turned out that the emphasis on openness, action, and teleology allowed the deduction of several principles that can guide us through the process of ascribing responsibility. Among these was the realisation that responsibility is a social construct whose validity depends partly on its viability. This means that the term and all of its dimensions must be clear but at the same time must leave room for individual interpretations. It must allow for prudence and judgment while still maintaining its communicational nature. The viability of reflexive responsibility, which is a

result of its teleology and affinity to action, demands the construction of institutions that support it. This means that accountability must be guaranteed on all different levels of society if responsibility is to play a role. This results in the problem of follow-up responsibilities. Ascribing responsibility to a subject for a particular object will often entail the development of other responsibilities which refer to the conditions of possibility of ascribing responsibility.

This theoretical framework of responsibility was then applied to the business use of computers and information technology. The relationship between responsibility and IS was discussed in three parts—in responsibility because of (past) problems with IS, responsibility for (future) use of IS, and responsibility through the medium of information technology in business. It turned out that the reflective use of the idea of responsibility was helpful and could advise decision makers how to behave in morally problematic situations. The communicative nature of responsibility and the resulting similarity to other ethical theories, such as the stakeholder theory or discourse theory, can guide the process of ascribing responsibility. But even on the individual level, the reflective idea of responsibility can in many cases offer insights into the nature of moral problems, which can be helpful when dealing with normative problems of the use of computers in business. In order to demonstrate this point, the situation of managers “responsible for” IS was chosen. The analysis of decision problems of these managers served to clarify the relevance of reflective responsibility to IS. At the same time the theory lends itself to the analysis of these problems from other angles as well.

Generally, it can be summarised that the reflective turn of the concept of responsibility is useful in that it allows the drawing of practically relevant conclusions. The resulting theory of reflective responsibility is a useful tool for dealing with normative problems that result from the encounter of business interests and modern technological developments.

A last and fitting question for the conclusion of this topic is: Does this text live up to its own expectations, and is it responsible to speak of (reflective) responsibility in IS? Using the same criteria developed throughout the text, this question can be answered in the affirmative. Going back to the three main features—to openness, affinity to action, and teleology—it seems that all three of them are met in some way or another. Openness is the most obvious consequence of this text. As was demonstrated earlier on, the conclusion to be drawn from the reflective use of openness is the clarity of the term. Reflective responsibility can only work if all of the aspects and the social meaning of the ascription are clear. It was the main aim of this text to clarify exactly these aspects, to make it clear what reflective responsibility means. Affinity to action

and teleology are met less directly, but it stands to reason that the clarification of the term responsibility will help establish them. If a reader of the text has a better idea of responsibility and therefore can realise a viable ascription, then the affinity to action would be met as well. This also implies some sort of teleology. The writing about these issues is also in part motivated by the idea that clarifying ethical theory will help better the circumstances in concrete situations so that the aspect of teleology is met as well.

The final conclusions to be drawn from the ideas presented here would then concern the other levels of responsibilities. Responsibilities, if taken seriously, result in other responsibilities. The questions resulting from this text about responsibility and IS would now be:

- Which institutions will be necessary to allow responsibility apart from the ones mentioned in the managerial sphere?
- What should the government do?
- What international responsibilities are necessary?
- Which normative discourses must be held?
- Which institutions must be constructed?

Without answers to these questions, the managerial responsibility for IS that was the centre of attention in this text is in danger of failing. Managerial responsibility seen from the viewpoint of a reflective theory, however, does offer a good starting point for these further questions.