INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes research in progress on the philosophical concept of authenticity—used as a framing device for providing an interpretation of aspects of both ethical and practical action on the part of information systems (IS) professionals. Ethical codes and prescriptive IS development methods for IS professionals can be found in most developed countries in the world. Here it is argued that ethical codes and IS methods may be of limited value in IS work. One key problem here is that IS analysts and designers have to intervene in organisations (and thereby intervene in the lives of the members of those organisations). It is argued that an important issue for IS research is whether they choose to do so in (what will be characterised as) an authentic manner, rather than doing so in sincere adherence with either a code of professional ethics or with a series of methodological precepts.

PERSONAL AUTHENTICITY AND ETHICAL CODES

Firstly, to characterise the concept of authenticity, a brief explanation will be given. Given that there is a lack of absolute guidance as to how one is to act in any given situation, the question of “what should one do...?” raises severe difficulties. Some sorts of authenticity questions may be familiar to the readers of this chapter. As a consultant, the author experienced several authenticity problems, a few are given as example questions here:
1. Should I use a methodology which has embedded values that I do not agree
   with?
2. Should I use a methodology which, in my judgement, is wholly inappropriate to
   the circumstances pertaining in the organisation?
3. Should I attempt to improve organisational performance by introducing greater
   accountability in a low-wage organisation?

These are difficult ethical questions, and whilst some of these may be covered
by the codes of conduct and practice of professional IS bodies, others may not be
(see Walsham, 1996). Also, such decisions require degrees of interpretation, and
therefore judgements about such matters are likely to vary from person to person.
In any case, not all IS professionals are members of professional societies, and
not all those members may be aware of the codes of conduct and practice, and no
doubt some will choose to ignore such things. More importantly, adherence to any
such code is unlikely to be practically enforceable; adherence will therefore have
to be “granted” voluntarily by the IS professionals concerned:

“In the scientific community the medical specialist has better defined
ethical codes than most other groups... They are also enforced by pow-
erful sanctions such as expulsion from the medical profession if serious
infringements occur. Many other professionals, including the British Com-
puter Society, have also drawn up ethical codes but these are often
vague and difficult to apply and enforce... Ethical responsibilities will
also vary both with the nature of work that is being carried out and the
nature of the social environment where the work is conducted.”
(Mumford, 1995, p. 6)

Because the value of ethical codes are limited, the sorts of questions
characterised above (which all IS professionals must probably face from time to
time) may best be understood as questions of personal authenticity, rather than
being understood as strictly ethical questions. Indeed, it has been suggested that,
“[T]he concept of authenticity is a protest against the blind, mechanical accep-
tance of an externally imposed code of values.” (Golomb, 1995, p. 11)

The concept of authenticity is often primarily connected to considerations put
forward by Nietzsche (1844-1900). Nietzsche’s statements and concerns about
such issues are a constant theme in his texts (especially 1956 and 1974). Cooper
elaborates the concept of authenticity via some examples from teaching. He expli-
cates the problems thus:

“A familiar disturbance felt by the teacher arises when some of these
[educational] policies, values, or whatever, are not ones to which he can
subscribe... The disturbance produces a problem of authenticity, for unless
the teacher resigns or is willing to invite considerable friction at work, he
must simulate agreement to views that are not his. [Alternatively] ... The
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