



Chapter III

Why Responsibility and Information Systems?

In this chapter we want to show why it makes sense to use the concept of responsibility with respect to the business use of information technology. There are three parts to the argument. At first, we will demonstrate that the development of the moral idea of responsibility is closely linked to modern developments in our societies. Many of these developments have to do with technology and information technology being the latest step in this direction. We will then continue to show that there are several structural similarities between responsibility and business on the one hand and information technology on the other hand. In a last step we will show that this theoretical setting is fruitful because it can rely on a rich background of ethical theories from different fields and perspectives. Before we can do so, however, the next step will have to be a first analysis of the term “responsibility.”

A TENTATIVE DEFINITION OF RESPONSIBILITY

The following paragraphs have the purpose of conveying a rough idea of what the term “responsibility” is supposed to denote in this book. They will point out the most important meanings and components without getting too deep into a discussion of contents and problems. These discussions will be the

subject of a detailed analysis in the next chapter. The purpose of this tentative definition is simply to give the reader a feeling for the term that will be required to understand why it is a sound idea to use the concept of responsibility in a discussion of business information technology.

The first difficulty when discussing responsibility is that the word is widely used and often denotes different, if not contradictory, facts and relationships. There are scholars who talk of an inflation of the use of the term (i.e., Homann, 1998, p. IX). Others point out that the clarity of the notion decreases with the frequency of its use (i.e., Etchegoyen, 1999, p. 44). If we believe what we hear, then there is little doubt that we live in a time of responsibility. Even terrorists enjoy accepting responsibility for their deeds. At the same time there is an inverse relationship between the readiness of accepting responsibility and the probability of consequences (Ilting, 1994, p. 176). As an illustration of the lack of clarity of the meaning of responsibility, let us look at a short story of a drunken sea captain that originates from H.L.A. Hart (1968, p. 211):

As captain of the ship, X was responsible for the safety of his passengers and crew. But on his last voyage he got drunk every night and was responsible for the loss of the ship with all aboard. It was rumoured that he was insane, but the doctors considered that he was responsible for his actions. Throughout the voyage he behaved quite irresponsibly, and various incidents in his career showed that he was not a responsible person. He always maintained that the exceptional winter storms were responsible for the loss of the ship, but in the legal proceedings brought against him, he was found criminally responsible for his negligent conduct, and in separate civil proceedings he was held legally responsible for the loss of life and property. He is still alive and he is morally responsible for the deaths of many women and children (Hart, 211).

The first thing we can state is that responsibility can have different meanings. It can stand for causality, for ethics, for morality, and for more idiosyncratic facts and relationships. We believe—and will demonstrate this in the following chapter—that responsibility is first and foremost a social construct aiming at ascription or imputation. Important dimensions of this ascription are the subject and the object. The object is ascribed to the subject. Thus, the subject is the answer to the question, “Who is responsible?”, and the object answers, “What is the subject responsible for?” This is true for all instances of

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