



Chapter IV

The Theory of Responsibility and Information Systems

In the broadest possible sense, responsibility is “but a set of practices that we use to describe and understand individual and social behaviour” (French, 1992, p. IX). In order to understand how we can use the term as a description and what results from the description, one must be aware of possible definitions, implications, dimensions, conditions, etc. In this chapter we will therefore attempt to describe all these different features of the word. In a first step we will look at the overall definitions that can be found in the literature and the implied objectives of its use. This part will also contain a first reflection on how responsibility relates to ethics and morality. The next part of this chapter will analyse the conditions that are commonly named for the ascription of responsibility. This will then allow us to discuss the classical dimensions, namely subject, object, and instance. From there we will proceed to take a look at the other relevant determinants of responsibility such as type, temporal dimension, sort of imputation, and the limits of ascription. As a summary we will extract the implications that most sorts and definitions of responsibility share. In total this chapter will lay the theoretical groundwork needed for addressing the problems that responsibility in information systems pose, which will then be discussed in the following chapters.

DEFINITION OF RESPONSIBILITY

Even though a definition is usually thought to be a rather brief process with a clear and concise phrase as result, the definition of responsibility is more

complex. The term responsibility has many different meanings, which makes it very hard to grasp. There are different ways to react to such confusion. On the one hand one can give up in the face of such an obstacle and decide to give one's own definition. The advantage would be the clarity that is derived from proceeding in this way. The downside is that much of the ordinary language meaning is lost. On the other hand one can therefore try to pay attention to the general use of the word and try to distil the relevant core. In this chapter we will attempt this latter method. It is useful to distinguish between the meanings and objectives of responsibility. Meanings and objectives often refer to one another. However, in some cases they can even become contradictory. The somewhat extensive discussion of these two aspects will find its justification later on in the book when it will become useful in explicating and solving some of the detailed problems such as the question: "Who can be subject of responsibility?"

Meanings of Responsibility

We have already seen that there is a multitude of possible meanings of the term responsibility. Another factor that complicates the definition of the word is its inflationary use. This follows from what was said so far. If responsibility is perceived as a moral notion that helps us cope with the problems of the modern world, then it is only natural that it is in high demand. The lack of clarity is thus a result of its positive potential and general recognition. Another problem is the overextension of the term. Some theoreticians of responsibility make claims that are so wide that they become meaningless. In order to overcome these problems, it is imperative that we define the term and narrow it down. The different ways in which it is used in everyday life should be helpful in this endeavour.

A first and clear hint to the content of responsibility comes from its etymology. Responsibility comes from the "response," from answering. We can find this as the heart of responsibility in the work of many authors. "Having a responsibility' is interwoven with the notion 'Having a liability to answer', and having such a liability or obligation seems to imply" (French, 1979, p. 210). The idea of a liability to answer is also reflected by Lewis (1972, p. 124f) or Collste (2000a, p. 125). This etymological root of the notion is reflected in other European languages as well. The French "*responsabilité*" also stands in a literal sense for "being able to respond" (Etchegoyen, 1993, p. 45; cf. Trigeaud, 1999, p. 94; Ricoeur, 1990a, p. 195). And the same is true for the German "*Verantwortung*," which is based on "*Antwort*," the answer (cf. Lenk & Maring, 1995, p. 247; Lenk, 1991a, p. 64; Schwartländer, 1991, p.

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