



## **Chapter VI**

# **Reflective Responsibility and the Management of Information Systems**

Before we start analysing the details of how reflective responsibility impacts on the use of information technology, we should briefly recapitulate what the purpose of the entire enterprise was and where we stand right now. Responsibility has been identified as a central term that is used in the public discussions about normative problems. It has been demonstrated that the core of responsibility is a social process of ascription. An overview of the literature on responsibility, however, has shown that the term is highly complex, consists of a large number of conditions, dimensions, and aspects, which in many cases are contradictory. In order to render the term useful, we have tried to identify common features that can be found in most if not all responsibility ascriptions and that help give meaning to its use. The three shared characteristics that were found are openness, affinity to action, and consequentialism. In a subsequent step it was asked what would happen if responsibility ascriptions were analysed with regard to these three characteristics. The result was a notion of responsibility that was called “reflective responsibility,” which was then further investigated with the aim of determining what the consequences of this reflective use of the term was. It was shown that reflective responsibility has theoretical and practical consequences that relate back to some of the ethical theories on which responsibility ascriptions might be based. Reflective responsibility requires the classical virtue of prudence as well as a modern reliance on institutional settings. It can be instantiated by following the ideas of other

theories of practical philosophy such as discourse ethics or the stakeholder approach.

Now that we finally have the solid foundation of a theory of responsibility, it will be possible to spell out the impact of responsibility on business information technology. Given everything that was said so far, it is obvious that the potential number of starting points for this discussion is almost infinite. Since this text aims at a readership with a business background as well as philosophical readers, it makes sense to concentrate on a business viewpoint. The salient position that seems predestined for the discussion is that of the manager. Analysing questions of (reflective) responsibility from the point of view of management has several advantages. Firstly, managers are commonly identified or defined as the persons responsible for and in an organisation. They tend to think of themselves as responsible as well and therefore will presumably agree to the approach. Secondly, even though responsibility is never a solipsistic process, managers will in many cases be the best placed to identify potential normative problems and to initiate responsibly ascriptions. Thirdly, they also possess the necessary means to start the process, to identify stakeholders and begin a discourse, and they fourthly have the institutional backing to sanction or reward the subjects.

This, of course, also contains the danger that due to their superiority in power, they might misuse responsibility or misdirect it in a direction favourable to their own ends. This is in itself then a problem of responsibility that will have to be addressed later on. Another problem of the concentration on the managerial viewpoint of responsibility is that many of the relevant issues are not within the power of individual managers. Again, however, for managerial responsibility this is a problem of its own which can be addressed in the responsibility framework. Given the alternative approaches (general responsibility, responsibility of the company, governmental responsibility, ...) the emphasis on managerial responsibility is still the best choice because managerial responsibility is characterised by its manifest results. In terms of reflective responsibility, this is a decisive criterion and the choice can thus be justified.

Having come so far, the next question is: Who are the managers whose position is to be analysed? The short answer is that the managers in question are those people who have it in their power to influence the use of IT in business. This is basically everybody from the CEO or CIO downwards to the operational manager or the IT specialist. This is again a rather large group, but since all of these managers or decision makers can influence moral circumstances and they all can be responsible, it seems reasonable to regard them all. The problem

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