



Chapter VIII

What is the Social Responsibility in the Information Age? Maximising Profit?

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ABSTRACT

Social responsibility is a highly popular term, and it seems to be of importance to what is happening in the information age. In this paper, the notion of social responsibility is analysed and its relationship to the information age is discussed. The result is that, while the term social responsibility may make sense, it is imperative to clarify its definition before drawing any further conclusions from it. On this condition, talking about social responsibility can be helpful in expressing some of the normative questions of the information age. If a clear definition is lacking, however, it might be a better idea to forget about the term rather than come to a counterintuitive conclusion as the one hinted at in the title of the paper, namely that it is an expression of social responsibility to maximise profits.

INTRODUCTION

In one of the best-known and most discussed articles about the topic of social responsibility Milton Friedman (1970) argues that it is the social responsibility of businesses to increase their profits. His argument is that a functioning market will lead to optimal allocation of resources and to the maximisation of well-being. So, in effect, what business does is morally responsible anyway, and if we just let people do their job without interfering on the grounds of some misunderstood morality, then everything turns out for the best.

Friedman's article is usually met by ambivalent reactions. On the one hand, the argument does not seem to include any logical flaws and it is hard to see where he is going wrong. On the other hand, the conclusion that it is socially responsible to maximise one's profits seems counterintuitive. Business ethicists have frequently tried to show that Friedman is wrong by pointing to potential weaknesses in the argument and in the assumptions of the argument. In this paper we will not be able to follow these arguments but we will try to clarify one of the concepts used by Friedman, the concept of social responsibility. Friedman's view of the topic is an extreme one and it is certainly not universally recognised. However, up to this day it is frequently discussed. The example is useful because it shows that the term "social responsibility" itself is neither clear nor unequivocal. Different authors think of different things when they talk about social responsibility and it is far from clear whether the term is really meaningful. The purpose of this paper will therefore be to shed some light on the concept of social responsibility and to discuss what impact the information age might have on it. For this purpose, we will begin with a brief discussion of the concept of responsibility and analyse how it changes if the attribute "social" is added. From there we will proceed to see how information technology or computers change this concept, enlarge or decrease the scope and scale of it, and what social responsibility in the information age might mean. In doing this we hope to prove that the term "social responsibility in the information age" is not at all a trivial one. We will demonstrate that responsibility is a concept that by definition aims to lead to concrete results in dealing with normative problems. It can only have this effect if it is clarified and well defined. In this sense, the article tries to impose some responsibility on the debate about social responsibility.

RESPONSIBILITY

In order to find out what the meaning of social responsibility in the information age might be, we will first look at the definition of responsibility and, in a next step, discuss what the specific properties of social responsibility are.

A Definition of Responsibility

In the most general sense, responsibility is a process of ascription.¹ The purpose is to ascribe an object to a subject. The subject is what is named as the answer to

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