Chapter IX

The Social Contract Revised: Obligation and Responsibility in the Information Society

Robert Joseph Skovira
Robert Morris University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces the social contract as a basis for personal and corporate responsibility and obligation. I briefly discuss three perspectives on the nature of the social contract: the Hobbesean, the Lockean, and the Rousseauean. I discuss the idea that information technology and the information society are in the process of revising the social contract. It sees the Internet as a key transformer of the sense of the social contract. It ends with a discussion of three revisionary frames: virtual communitarianism, radical individualism, and social capitalism.

INTRODUCTION

This paper began as a discussion of obligation and responsibility within the frames of the social contract and the information society. The paper has evolved into a discussion of information technology as a cultural paradigm and the social contract.

The essay is about delineating versions of the social contract. The discussion sees the World Wide Web (in all its many evolving forms) as an artifact of the information technology paradigm and a phenomenon of the information society (others may call this the information age, or the digital age). I prefer information society; ages do not have any pretense to fostering or enhancing a social contract.

One final note here is that I find the constellation of social contract, ethics, law, information technology, and information society to be like a black hole. The notes I attempt here are written on the slippery slope of these ideas. Taking responsibility for behavior is based, in part, on a sense of obligation that shapes responsibility. A sense of obligation rests within the sense of a social contract. Being responsible, in the other part, is personal justification of behavior. Some may refer to this as a conscience. This also answers expectations derived from the social contract. For individuals and corporations in the information society, and conducting e-commerce activities, obligation and responsibility rest upon the sense of the social contract within the information society.

This essay raises the issue of a moral sense of taking responsibility for one's behavior and what this means to individuals or corporations living in the information society. In the literature of business ethics, there is a long tradition of discussion of the responsibility of corporations and individuals to the society of which they are a part.

Corporate and individual obligations are derived from a sense of social contract. The ethos of the Internet, the World Wide Web, and the information society contribute to and determine this sense of social contract. We must (we are obligated to) analyze and understand the conceptions of the social contract in the information society. We unfold the meaning of social contract. What are the notions of the information society and the social contract and how do we need to analyze and understand them? What does the idea of a social contract mean within the frame of information society?

Social responsibility and business practices are linked in corporate behavior. Corporate and personal behaviors are expressive of the conjunction of responsibility and obligation and business practices. Business practices are habitual ways and means of doing business, buying and selling. The business world expects actions that are accountable and that carry out agreed upon tasks. Usually these accountable and obligated behaviors are explicitly stated in legal contracts. But even the legalized versions that enforce responsible and expected actions are dependent upon expectations of a moral worldview of the social contract. The practices of e-commerce and eBusiness should satisfy the behavioral expectations of the same moral worldview. However, in the brave new world of e-commerce, the view is much more stark. In this digital world of business practices, the prevailing perception is Darwinian, where corporate and personal survival may be a matter of innovative practices adapting the firm or the person to the digital business circumstances. Digital Darwinism is a phenomenon of doing business on the World Wide Web. This discussion of

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