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# A CRITICAL VIEW OF THE ETHICAL NATURE OF INTERPRETIVE RESEARCH: PAUL RICŒUR AND THE OTHER

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## Abstract

*While ethics is usually seen as a possible research subject and ethical standards have to be observed when doing IS research, there does not seem to be any direct link between ethics and specific research approaches. This paper argues that this perception is wrong and that the interpretive paradigm of IS research is directly and necessarily linked with ethics. The paper uses the theories of Paul Ricœur to argue that both theoretical underpinnings of IS research, namely phenomenology and hermeneutics, have an ethical quality. Both rely on the concept of the other in order to interact and make sense of the world. Using Ricœur's writings, it is argued that all interaction with others requires consideration of the shared vision of the good life as well as the moral rules that will bring about cooperation and the question of how these rules can be applied prudently. Interpretive research thus has an ethical quality that should not be ignored.*

*Keywords: interpretivism, Paul Ricœur, the other, ethics, morality*

# 1 INTRODUCTION

Research and practice of information systems are often ethically charged. There is a virtual infinity of ways in which the use of IS or the research concerning this use can affect individual and collective rights and obligations. Researchers can either recognise this ethical quality of IS or they can choose to ignore it. Both are recognised attitudes which allow publication in top IS journals. It is typically viewed as a personal choice whether a researcher wants to pay explicit attention to ethics or not. This personal preference is not usually seen to be directly related to a research "paradigm", ontology, epistemology, or methodology. While researchers interested in ethics will usually prefer certain approaches, there does not seem to be a compelling reason for this.

This paper will argue that the recognition of ethics as a central aspect of IS research cannot be reduced to personal preferences or institutional requirements (ethics committees) but is a necessary consequence of the choice of certain research approaches. It will concentrate on interpretive research and put forward the argument that the ontology, epistemology, and methodology of interpretive research require an explicit reflection of ethical matters. In order to support the argument, the paper will draw upon the theory of Paul Ricœur. The paper concentrates on interpretivism but it should not be misunderstood to imply that there is no link between ethics and other research approaches.

The paper will start out by defining interpretive research and explaining two of its characteristic features, namely phenomenology and hermeneutics. It will then introduce Paul Ricœur's contribution to the debate and show how his link between the two influences our understanding of interpretive research. From there, the central idea of the "other" in Ricœur's work is presented. It is argued that phenomenological and hermeneutic research needs to take seriously this concept of the other and that this has manifest ethical implications. After discussing examples of treatment of the other in IS research, the paper will conclude by indicating the conclusions that interpretive IS researchers should draw.

Even though the paper discusses interpretive research, it is not a piece of interpretive research but rather part of the critical research tradition. Critical research has been identified as a third research "paradigm" in social sciences in general and IS in particular (Chua, 1986; Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991). The idea of "paradigms" is misleading, however, because it wrongly suggests that the three paradigms are mutually exclusive and that they represent the totality of possible research approaches. Rather than accepting this paradigm definition of critical research, this paper follows the concept of critical research as defined by its intention, topics, and theories (Stahl, 2004). The most important defining moment of critical research is its intention to change the status quo (Ngwenyama & Lee, 1997; Trauth, 2001). This desire for change is based on the perception that society or aspects thereof are unjust, that people are disempowered and alienated. Critical research stands in the tradition of Marxist critique of capitalism (Hirschheim & Klein, 1989; Nord & Jermier, 1992). Critical research aims to expose the power relations and distortions that exist in its realm of interest. In doing so, the critical intention aims to help the research subjects emancipate or empower themselves (Lyytinen & Hirschheim, 1988; Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2001; Mingers, 1992; Dawson & Newman, 2002; Brooke, 2002).

It is a highly complex question how critical research can achieve this ambitious goal of emancipating its research subjects. However, in the context of this paper, the critical intention can be defined quite clearly. The main topic of the research is the relationship between interpretive research and ethics. The misleading status quo is that interpretive research can be value-neutral. It is the aim of the paper to change this false consciousness of researchers and thus liberate them to see and embrace the ethical quality of their research; or to provide "impulses to the liberation from or resistance to what dominates and leads to constraints in human [i.e. the researchers'] decision making" (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000 p. 1).

The research method chosen for this aim is that of conceptual / philosophical research. By analysing the concept of interpretive research and discussing the components and methods typically linked with it, the paper will develop the argument that it is part of the very definition and thus of the social construction of interpretive research to have an ethical nature. This method of research allows paying close attention to the linguistic construction of reality that is another one of the characteristics of critical research. It also reflects the view that philosophy should contribute to the clarification of concepts (Tugendhat, 1992; Wittgenstein, 1963).

## **2 INTERPRETIVE RESEARCH IN IS**

This section will discuss the concept of interpretivism. It will briefly explain the history and aim of the idea and then present a brief summary of the two most important aspects of interpretivism, namely phenomenology and hermeneutics.

### **2.1 The Concept of Interpretivism**

Unlike many of the related terms that are usually discussed in the context of research philosophy, ontology, or epistemology, such as "positivism", "realism", "idealism" etc., the concept of "interpretivism" lacks a clear philosophical history and thus a defining discourse. In its current use in social sciences and IS research it stands for a collection of research approaches that are best defined using their shared characteristic as being non-positivist. Interpretivism can thus be characterised by looking at the features of positivism that it rejects and the alternatives it suggests. This definition is not conclusive as it would include other non-positivist approaches that are not interpretivist. However, it is useful as a starting point of the investigation into interpretivism.

Positivism is based on the ontological basis of realism, meaning that reality exists independent of the observer (Landry & Banville, 1992; Darke, Shanks & Broadbent, 1998; Myers & Avison, 2002). Interpretivism is sceptical of this claim and contends that either reality itself is a social construct or that at least our knowledge of reality is socially constructed (Walsham, 1995; Orlikowski & Baroudi 1991) or gained through social constructions (Klein & Myers, 1999). Based on its realist ontology, positivism subscribes to an empiricist epistemology, which contends that true statements about reality can be deduced from impartial observation and experience. The aim of positivist research is to find such true statements that objectively describe reality as it is. Lacking the observer-independence of reality, interpretivism needs to follow a different research aim. This aim is usually to understand situations and give plausible and acceptable accounts of them (Varey, Wood-Harper & Wood, 2002). Where positivism tries to describe laws that can be used for prediction by using quantitative methods, interpretivism looks at context and singular occurrences in the hope of extracting meaning and making sense, typically using qualitative methods (Trauth & Jessup, 2000; Schultze & Leidner, 2002; Lee & Baskerville, 2003). In order to achieve these aims, interpretivism leans heavily on hermeneutics and phenomenology (Lee, 1991), two philosophical traditions that will be discussed in the next section.

### **2.2 Phenomenology**

Interpretivist research often claims to be based upon or to use phenomenological thoughts, to the point where Galliers (1991) equates the two. Phenomenology as a term is somewhat ambiguous. It can either refer to general first-person descriptions of human experience or it can refer to the philosophical approach developed by Husserl and extended by others such as Heidegger or Merleau-Ponty (Beavers, 2002). While both uses of the term are sometimes referred to in interpretive IS research, we will concentrate here on the second one. In this paper, the emphasis will be put on the later phenomenology, which was strongly influenced by Heidegger, and which can be called existential phenomenology (cf. Introna & Ilharco, 2004). Heidegger and his involvement with National Socialism poses a serious ethical question for phenomenology, which this paper cannot do justice to.

The aim of phenomenology was to overcome the perceived remoteness of established philosophy and go back to the things themselves and to discover their essences. Heidegger uses the etymology of the term phenomenon to define it as that "which shows itself in itself, the manifest" (1993, p.28). Phenomenology thus has to do with self-manifestation (Moran, 2000). For Heidegger (1993, p. 37) phenomenology is the science of the being of being (*Wissenschaft vom Sein des Seienden*) and thus part of ontology. Despite the use of terms such as "essence", the "things themselves", or "ontology", phenomenology does not deal with an objective reality similar to realism. Rather, the starting point of phenomenology is that the phenomena, the manifestations of our perceptions, are results of conscious acts and not independently given. The reason why we have a world is that our consciousness opens it up to us, makes it meaningful and discloses it.

Resulting from this interest in perception and consciousness (Lyotard, 1993), phenomenology rejects the distinction of subject and object, since the subject constitutes the object, the phenomenon, and without subject there could be no object. A related aspect of phenomenology is that it concentrates on the conditions of the possibility of perception and that it emphasises Heidegger's point that there cannot be any perception (for us) outside of human realities. That means that all phenomenology has to accept the starting point that we are always already in the world (something that Heidegger denotes with the term "*Dasein*"), that there cannot be "objective" knowledge outside of human existence (Dreyfus, 1993; Introna, 1997; Stuart, 2002). For an IS researcher this means that one has to take the pre-scientific understanding of researchers as well as research subjects serious (Ciborra, 2000).

An important aspect of being-in-the-world (*Dasein*) is that it is never abstract but always already in a situation and always embodied (Introna & Wihittaker, 2003; Capurro & Pingel, 2002). The embodied being-in-the-world does not exist in an abstract objective world but in what Husserl calls the life-world. The life-world can best be understood as an horizon within which the individual moves (Gadamer, 1990; Habermas, 1985). Phenomena are thus constituted by the conscious act of individuals who are always already in the world, who are embodied, and who live within a life-world. The central question of the role of the body and embodiment is of importance with regards to ICT because it raises the old question of the divide between mind and body. This is one of the reasons why we have a problem with the morality of technical systems, which don't seem to be embodied (Stahl, 2004) or have a life-world (). Only within the life-world can meaning be constituted, and meaning is what phenomena are about. This raises the problem of how the life-world is created and how there can be overlap between the life-world of different individuals without which there could be no communication and interaction. On the one hand this is a main point of critique of phenomenology as being overly individualistic (Gergen, 1999), but on the other hand, it also gives way to a possible solution, namely the idea of hermeneutics.

### 2.3 Hermeneutics

The term "hermeneutics" is derived from the Greek messenger god Hermes, whose task it was to convey understanding of divine matters to the mortals (cf. Rathswohl, 1991). The underlying idea of hermeneutics is to provide a way of understanding texts. This referred originally to divine text, mostly the bible, and was manifested in an attempt to understand the bible as it was truly meant to be understood (Boland, 1985). Contemporary hermeneutics has moved away from the hope of being able to produce a "correct" understanding and is looking more for an appropriate interpretation of texts. This problem arises where understanding of texts is not self-evident (Hirschheim & Klein, 1989). Indeed, closer analysis reveals that understanding is never self-evident because the understanding of the recipient of texts is always different from that of the author. This, in turn, is based on the partially idiosyncratic nature of the life-world of writer and reader, which brings us back to the phenomenological question of being-in-the-world or *Dasein*.

In order to understand a text, the reader must always already have a prior understanding. He or she must anticipate the text and the resulting reading of the text reflects on the extant knowledge of the reader. The relationship between prior knowledge and reception of a text is thus circular, a fact that

Gadamer has christened the "hermeneutic circle" (Gadamer, 1990; cf Butler, 1998). The purpose of hermeneutics can thus no longer be to cover up the difference between author and reader but rather to make it explicit, to demonstrate the reasons for the understanding of a text (Klein & Myers, 1999).

Hermeneutic thought has had a huge influence on those academic disciplines that deal with texts, namely the humanities and social sciences. The concept is often used to delimit natural sciences from other academic disciplines. This is frequently done using the German words "*verstehen*" (literally, "to understand") and "*erklären*" (literally, "to explain") (cf. Hausman, 1994). Natural sciences attempt to discover immutable natural laws whose knowledge allows the researcher to explain phenomena and to predict them. It thus follows the idea of "*erklären*". For other types of research, most notably the social sciences, this does not seem to be applicable (Doolin, 1998). Social sciences are interested in human actions and humans do not follow natural laws. Human societies are made up of free individuals who can make decisions according to their wishes. Social processes are, at least partially, the product of individual action (Giddens, 1984). This means that the "*erklären*" model of natural sciences is not applicable. Instead, the social scientist is interested in understanding human action, thus in "*verstehen*". In order to understand human action, the researcher must engage in a dialogue with his or her research objects, giving them the chance to explain their action. The researcher can then try to understand and describe why people acted the way they did.

This model of understanding is clearly quite similar to the making sense of texts and it can thus be described using the hermeneutic circle. Hermeneutics does not aim to explain and predict but to understand and to make sense of others' actions (Myers & Avison, 2002; Lee, 1994). A very important aspect of this is the idea of meaning. In order to understand someone else's action, one needs to be able to understand their motives which means that there must be a common ground upon which researcher and research object can agree on a meaning. If the object's utterances or actions are based on meanings that are completely alien to the researcher, then no understanding and thus no hermeneutic processes are possible. This again leads us back to the idea of a life-world in phenomenology and the fact that there needs to be at least some overlap between life-worlds in order for an exchange of meaning and thus understanding to take place.

The adoption of a hermeneutic stance has a number of consequences for the research one can undertake. The research must engage in the hermeneutic circle of meaning creation, which means that quantitative methods, albeit not necessarily useless, lose a lot of their interest. Part of the understanding needs to be a comprehension of the life-world of the research objects, which means that context is at least as important as information. Hermeneutic research must be sensitive to the social construction of reality and to language as the main means of this construction.

Summarising, one can say that interpretive research is interested in meanings and their social construction. Interpretivists look for the essence of phenomena but they are aware that phenomena are created by perception, that they must be seen as constructs of humans who are in the world, are always already in situations and live a finite life. These humans create meaning in their life-worlds through interaction. Understanding this meaning requires a circular engagement with texts. The interpretivist aims not to explain the world in terms of laws but to understand it by clarifying the motives and life-worlds of the subjects. Having thus briefly outlined the characteristics of interpretive research, the next step will be to introduce the thinking and role of Paul Ricœur in order to then demonstrate that interpretive research is intrinsically ethical.

### **3 THE OTHER AND THE SELF: PAUL RICŒUR**

Paul Ricœur is a leading French philosopher interested in the relationship of phenomenology and hermeneutics. Born in Valence, France in 1915 he studied philosophy and took an interest in the existentialist phenomenology prevalent at his time. He was influenced by the German phenomenological school of Husserl and Heidegger. After having spent most of the second World

War as a German prisoner of war, he returned to an academic career in France and later in the USA. One of the reasons why he is a scholar of interest to the IS community is that he is familiar with the Anglo-American tradition of analytic philosophy as well as continental European philosophy. However, in current IS research he is not particularly well known. When he is referred to at all, then as a scholar of hermeneutics whose main achievement it is to extend the role of texts in hermeneutic understanding to non-textual matters such as the social context and interaction (Butler 1998). While this is certainly part of his impact, it neglects the fact that Ricœur's hermeneutics is based on his anthropological ideas and is intrinsically linked to ethics. Demonstrating this close link between ethics and hermeneutics is the main aim of the paper because it will allow us to develop the argument that interpretive research has an ethical foundation and must take ethical issues into consideration. In order to develop this argument, the following sections will first introduce the concept of the "other" in order to then discuss Ricœur's understanding of ethics.

### 3.1 The "Other"

The phenomenological description of humans as being-in-the-world always includes the fact that being-in-the-world implies being in the world with others. Being-in-the-world is never alone. However, the role of others for *Dasein* is ambivalent. On the one hand one's life-world is constituted through interaction and the other is therefore a central part of the self. On the other hand, there is also the idea of "the One" (*das Man*) where Heidegger (1992) argues that following the current fashions will take away being-in-the-world's authenticity.

This phenomenological interest in the other has resonated strongly in French philosophy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The other can have different meanings, however, and therefore different authors have tried to differentiate the terminology by using the terms "l'autre", "autrui", or "l'Autre". Very briefly, one can distinguish between the other as another person, the other as a transcendent being that is reflected in other humans, and the completely other which is inaccessible to us, such as death. All three of these are closely related. According to Levinas, who had a strong influence on Ricœur, the other as in the other person, is a manifestation of the totally other, the transcendent (Levinas, 1988). This idea of the transcendent, of the completely other, can even move philosophy close to questions of God (Lavaud, 1982). And yet, there is the fact that the other is not only radically unknown and unknowable, he or she is also similar to me. The other is someone, who, like me, can see himself or herself as an agent, who allows for a reciprocal relationship (Ricœur, 1991). The other's face, his or her countenance, reminds me of this transcendent yet reciprocal relationship and creates ethical obligations (Levinas, 1984, 1988).

One of Ricœur's achievement is that he manages to link the phenomenology of the other with the self. In "Soi-même comme un autre" (Ricœur, 1990) (translated approximately as: "oneself as another") he develops the relationship between the self and the other and the ensuing ethical connection. Ricœur's self can be conceptualised as being on the middle ground between a Cartesian and a radical anti-Cartesian conception (Dauenhauer, 2002). That means that the self is neither a completely independent free-floating agent but neither is it totally subdued by external influences. Ricœur accepts that the self is an embodied being-in-the-world but at the same time it is capable of initiative, of ascribing action to itself. The self, however, is never alone and self-defined. The selfness of oneself always implies the otherness of the other to such a degree that the one cannot even be conceived of without the other (Ricœur, 1990 p. 14). This recognises that the "you" is another "me" (Ricœur, 1949) but it also goes beyond this. The very constitution of action is social. Acting always means acting with others, whether it is in cooperation, competition, or battle (Ricœur, 1983).

This relationship of the self with the other is not just a trivial coexistence but results in moral obligations. These can be explained by again recurring to the phenomenological essence of *Dasein* as being-in-the-world. One of the central tenets of being-in-the-world is that it is being in time. This aspect, largely ignored in IS research, is relevant because it means that being-in-the-world is not infinite and is always faced by certain death. On a superficial level this may seem like a platitude that

cannot add anything to social science research. However, when looking closer, one can easily see the argument why this is actually one of the most central aspects of life. The fact that we will die is the main motivator and the most important background to what we do. If we lived infinitely there would be no point in maximising profits, saving time, organising efficiently etc. The finitude of time is a basic tenet of late capitalist societies. The self thus needs to find its place in life in the face of death. Death is not only certain for the self, but also for the other. At the same time, death is not something that we can ever really contemplate but that always remains aloof and detached. Understanding death means dying and thus no longer understanding death. This background of finite time and certain death is a shared characteristic of French philosophy from Montaigne (1910) to Levinas (1983). Moral obligations come into being because we are faced with our own and the other's finitude (Weil 1998). These obligations are thus inextricably linked to the essence of *Dasein*. They are not part of a free choice but anthropological constants. This is important to keep in mind when we will tie the interpretivist emphasis on understanding the other with an obligation to consider the ethical implications of this.

### 3.2 Ethics, Morality, and Prudence

Ricœur distinguishes between three aspects of normative questions, which he denotes with the terms "ethics", "morality", and "prudence". Ethics stands for the teleological desire for a good life. This is based on the Aristotelian understanding of ethics and emphasises the importance of teleology as the basis of ethical thinking. The first step in thinking about norms and the construction of cooperation must always be a definition of our individual and collective ideas of a good life. The second step then is morality, which, for Ricœur, represents the duties and obligations that surround us. Morality is best represented by a Kantian deontology, by the attempt to find norms or maxims that are universalisable. Ricœur does not see a contradiction between the Kantian and Aristotelian approach to ethics but believes that a Kantian set of rules will require a concept of the good life (cf. Dauenhauer, 2002; Ricœur, 1995; Ricœur, 1991; Ricœur, 1990; Mongin, 1998). In his more recent writings, Ricœur emphasises that the rules by themselves are not enough to realise the aim of the good life but that they require careful and deliberate application, for which he uses the term "prudence" or the Greek "*phronesis*" which might best be translated as practical wisdom (cf. Ricœur, 2001).

These three aspects of normative questions are closely linked to the hermeneutic and phenomenological basis of Ricœur's philosophy and particularly with the concept of the other. The other figures strongly in his brief characterisation of ethics as aiming for the good life, with and for others, in just institutions (Ricœur, 1990 p. 1991 p. 257). Ricœur remarks that ideas of the good and ethics seem always to be linked to whether they have good results for others (Ricœur 1990). The different levels of ethical reasoning are also linked to the other. Why can we not simply retain the Aristotelian notion of the good life? The reason is that we are not alone and that even a shared notion of the good life will keep us safe. In order to avoid and overcome violence we need the transition from the teleological idea of the good life to deontological rules and obligations. The idea of violence is where Levinas's conception of the other enters the play again. Ethical considerations cannot be limited to the self and the other, but there is also the "third" (Malka, 1984; Levinas, 1984). The third is also someone other but is distinct from the other as discussed above by the fact that he or she does not interact with the self but with the other. If the other commits violence to the third, then I, the self, may have an ethical obligation to intervene. It is easy to see that this links closely with the phenomenological idea of *Dasein* as being with and among others.

Another approach to the relationship of ethics / morality and the other is the concept of responsibility. Ricœur frequently expresses his ethical considerations in terms of responsibility. The etymology of the term suggests that responsibility is closely linked to the answer, the "response". This means that the other is of constitutive importance for responsibility. For Ricœur, I am responsible because someone else counts on me; the other asks "where are you", and my answer "I am here" is the starting point of the ascription and acceptance of responsibility (Ricœur, 1990 p. 195). Responsibility is linked to all three of the normative levels. It is based on a shared view of the good life and it allows the



consideration of future occurrences. At the same time, the concept is closely associated with its judicial use and thus to rules, obligations, and punishment (Ricoeur, 1995b). Finally, responsibility requires a prudent application of rules and a thorough understanding and interpretation of the relevant context. What is important to note for our argument is that any relationship with the other is always caught up in a web of responsibilities (Etchegoyen, 1993). One may choose to ignore or deflect these responsibilities but they are constitutive for any interpersonal relationship. We can now return to the question what all this has to do with IS research, and particularly with interpretive IS research.

## **4 THE ETHICS OF INTERPRETIVE IS RESEARCH**

So far this paper has offered a definition of interpretive research as being based on phenomenology and hermeneutics as well as an introduction into Paul Ricoeur's philosophy. This final part of the paper will demonstrate how these two parts fit together. For this purpose, we will first look at the role of the other in IT / IS research and then discuss the ethical consequences of the choice of interpretivism as a research approach.

### **4.1 The Other in IT / IS Research**

It is useful to briefly note where and how the other plays a role in IT / IS research. It will be impossible to discuss these issues in depth but one can give a brief overview. One can distinguish between obvious, implicit, and fundamental issues. Obvious issues are those where the other is either explicit or quite obvious of central importance. They touch on how we treat the other, how she treats us or how others interact with the help of IT. Among those obvious issues, there are the topics of computer and information ethics. These obvious links between IT and the other include questions of privacy and surveillance, biometrics, access etc. Apart from the way IT affects the individual other, it also has consequences for communities and societies which are discussed under headings such as e-government, e-democracy, power and IT, virtual organisations, e-teaching and e-learning.

The other is also affected by IT in less obvious ways. Many of the traditional IS research topics have an implicit impact on the other. This includes, for example, question of IS development. Questions of risk management in IS are as relevant to the other as are problems of trust creation in e-commerce or knowledge management. In these areas the concept of the other is rarely addressed directly, but it takes little fantasy to see a clear relationship.

Finally, there are fundamental issues to do with IS / IT which affect our way of perceiving the other where this relationship is rarely reflected. These have to do with the consequences of technology use for human interaction. It has been argued that IT is increasingly being used as a metaphor for describing human beings. If this happens then it changes the way we perceive the other. We are in danger of losing sight of the countenance of the other and instead think of a disposable hard drive containing useful information. This was a question of high importance to the founders of computer ethics (Wiener, 1954; Weizenbaum, 1976) but it seems to have disappeared from the agenda despite a much more wide-spread use of IT and thus a possibly higher importance of the issue.

### **4.2 The Other in Interpretive Research**

Having shown that the other is relevant to IS research in general, the paper will now conclude by showing the importance of the other to interpretive research. This simply requires establishing connections between the parts of the text used so far. Interpretive IS research was introduced as being based on phenomenology and hermeneutics. The phenomenological background emphasises the relationship between the self and the other as a constitutive aspect of being-in-the-world. Accepting phenomenology as a basis of research means that the researcher implicitly recognises that he or she is always thrown into a situation where the self - the researcher's self as well as the research object's self - is constantly surrounded by the other. The other is part of the nature of the life-world. Phenomenological explorations of meaning point towards the other as the bearer of meaning.

Phenomenology, one could summarise, is based on a philosophical anthropology which requires the other as part of the *Dasein*, the being-in-the-world.

A similar case can be made for hermeneutics. Hermeneutics as the art of understanding texts and their meaning requires the existence of texts, which are created by the other, as well as a willingness to take the other serious by engaging with those texts. The hermeneutic circle explains how the phenomenological being-in-the-world can engage with and understand the other without having to recur to a positivist or realist external reality.

The other is thus a concept that can explain the ontology as well as the epistemology of interpretivist IS research. It also goes a long way toward understanding interpretivist methodology and methods. These are typically qualitative and require immediate interaction such as semi- or unstructured interviews, participant observation, ethnography etc. All of these only make sense on the basis of the assumption that the other is a worthy source of interaction and that the extraction of meaning is only possibly through a serious engagement with the other. The collective endeavour of creating meaningful exchanges which are the outcome of interpretive research is deeply linked with the implicit acceptance of the other as the main source but also main aim of interaction.

## **5 CONCLUSION: THE ETHICS OF INTERPRETIVE IS RESEARCH**

The aim of this paper was to show that interpretive IS research is intrinsically ethical. That means that interpretive researchers not only have to think about ethics as a possible research object and the ethical rules of doing research but also about the ethical basis and content of their specific approach to doing research, no matter what the object is. We now have produced all of the premises for this conclusion. Interpretive research is based on phenomenology and hermeneutics. Phenomenology and hermeneutics require the acceptance of the other as a building block for the constitution of reality and the creation of meaning. Interacting with the other is intrinsically ethical and presupposes taking the other serious, accepting him or her as a dignified human being with rights and obligations comparable to ours. There is thus a direct link from the choice of the interpretivist research "paradigm" to a necessary acceptance of the fact that ethics is a central part of this research approach.

The paper has used the philosophy of Paul Ricœur to support this argument. Ricœur is a philosopher who has written extensively about phenomenology, hermeneutics, the other, and ethics. His theories allow us to spell out the consequences of this realisation of the ethical nature of interpretive research in some more depth. Interacting with the other points to three different aspects of ethical interaction: the teleological aim, deontological rules, and prudent applications. This means that when interacting with the other we need to consider their version of the good life. We need to think about which moral rules will result from this ethical vision. And, finally, we will have to consider how these rules can be applied in specific situations.

These three ethical aspects will have consequences for the planning, execution, and publication of research. The question what these consequences will look like leads us back to the start of the paper, to the fact that it was framed as a piece of critical research. Critical research claims to be reflective and it aims to make a difference. Doing critical research thus requires the researcher to question whether the goal of changing reality has been achieved. This is one of the most serious problems of critical research because it requires the researcher to consider the aim of change in advance without becoming a utopian who wants to force her version of reality on the world. In this case, the reflection of the research will need to point out that the main aim of the paper was to expose a discursive closure, a taken for granted assumption that needed to be challenged: namely the idea that interpretive research can be purely descriptive, that it can concentrate on a specific aspect of IS without undertaking explicit ethical considerations.

It is open at this point whether the critical intention of making a difference will be achieved. However, it is hoped that the argument is sufficiently stringent to compel interpretive researchers to accept it. If

so, this would mean that the ethics implied in the research process would have to be made explicit and that the good life, the moral rules, and their prudent applications will need to form part of the research. If the paper achieves this goal, then it should be considered successful. The next step of the discussion will then have to be a debate about how these ethical aspects should be considered in interpretive research.

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