Association for Information Systems
AIS Electronic Library (AISeL)

AMCIS 1999 Proceedings

Americas Conference on Information Systems (AMCIS)

December 1999

Authenticity and Ethical Practice in IS: Technicism, Reflective Practice and Answerability

Robert Stephens
University of The West of England, UK

Follow this and additional works at: http://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis1999

Authenticity and Ethical Practice in IS: Technicism, Reflective Practice and Answerability

Robert Stephens, University of the West of England, Robert.Stephens@uwe.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper examines the concept of authenticity in IS ethics from a position informed from work in progress on Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. Three approaches to ethical resolution are described: *technicism* and *reflective practice* are found wanting with respect to authenticity, while *answerability* generally conflicts with IS agendas.

Introduction

The ubiquity of ethical issues in computer use and development is now recognized in the mainstream literature (eg ACM, 1995). Professional consensus clearly identifies some ethical problems; pornography, intellectual property, surveillance, software piracy, model and algorithm verity, and so on. Other areas are less consensual; representation, power, responsibility, equity, work discipline, for example, all have concealed ethical challenges that are dilemmatic, and ultimately ideological. The IS ethics literature tends to focus on explicating ethical issues and problematizing or prescribing action, but little attention is given to the identity of the virtuous practitioner (Walsham, 1996). In his work on *authenticity* Probert (1998) has questioned the adequacy of ethical procedures in IS by suggesting that a slavish adherence to an externally imposed code of values will compromise the practitioners' ethical stance. The virtuous practitioner has responsibilities of interpretation and application, choices that may not be very comfortable, but which may be evaded by appealing to some external authority. Such elision of authenticity may be countered with appeals for reflective evaluation, but many accounts of the 'reflective practitioner' remain highly instrumental in their prime focus on mundane 'knowing how' or craft aspects of the profession. ('Authenticity' here follows the usual definition as that which is achieved when people take hold of the direction of their own lives without the direction being determined for them by external factors.)

In this paper authenticity and ethical practice are explored from the perspectives of technicism, reflective practice and answerability, a term derived from Bakhtin's (1981) philosophy of the act or deed. The paper is developed from work in progress on dialogism in IS (Stephens, 1997; 1999). Bakhtin argued that ethical responsibility is constructed on an engaged participation with others that cannot be displaced by theory, a clear departure from the more familiar Kantian reflective formulations of normative or consequentialist ethics, and indeed, the reflective practitioner itself. Applied to IS, Bakhtin's concept suggests IS enquiry and practice is internally legitimated and thereby unresolvable by a universal ethics, but that authenticity is problematic because of a normalizing agenda.

Technicism, reflective practice and answerability

Conventional systems development methodologies do not explicitly deal with ethical conflicts, but assume the implicit acceptance of the single perspective embedded in the methodology (Wood-Harper, et al, 1996). Most methodologies only treat technical and rational issues, a perspective that may be defined as 'technicism' (Halliday, 1998), or the presumption that good practice is equivalent to efficient performance which achieves ends that are theoretically prescribed for analysts. Technicism holds that all practice is like production or service industry, that quality may be guaranteed through standardization of the development process, and that ultimately professional practical judgments are suspect. This may delude practitioners into thinking that they are less free to act than they actually are, and ethical responsibility for an action may be evaded by appeal to a theoretical imperative (such as the laws of nature).

For technicists, general theories can be set out to guide particular practices, but the narrower technical education may be supplemented with sociology, psychology and organizational studies to produce students better equipped to face ethical and moral issues. The sort of criticisms leveled at this academic model are that theoretical studies are insufficient to guarantee effective IS professional practice, or that their relevance to practice is not at all clear, or indeed, that theory construction has become a barrier to real world understanding (Barley, 1996). Borrowing directly from an argument made by Carr (1997) in teacher education, both theory-construction and direct technical application of theories to practice can be countered as follows:

1. The discovery of truths about the world or the construction of theoretical explanations are not the principal goals of IS enquiry, deliberation or endeavour. In this sense, at least, IS theorizing does not (paradoxically) appear to be primarily theoretical.

2. The precise relationship of such undeniably theoretical forms of enquiry as psychology, sociology, cybernetics and so on to the processes of practical deliberation about organizations, the workplace and people is inferentially complex, value-laden, contingent,

and by no means straightforwardly construable in terms of direct application.

3. Although IS discourse is primarily practical and therefore concerned with the achievement of certain sorts of goods, it differs from technical deliberation in not being exclusively or even primarily concerned with questions of efficiency and effectiveness in the course of such pursuit. IS problems therefore cannot be solely construed in technical terms.

4. Therefore IS discourse is evaluative or moral rather than solely theoretical or technical. Evaluative arguments, unlike theoretical arguments are defeasible, and, unlike technical inferences, means are invariably related to ends *internally* or *constitutively* rather than externally or causally (as theory demands).

A contrast to technicism appears in the idea of reflective practice (Schon, 1987) where ends and means are continually reformulated by practitioners and professionals' own authentic insights are preseved. Theory and practice are constantly reinterpreted within particular contexts that can be described in both moral and technical ways, and more elusive agendas such as emancipation and democracy may be considered. However, issues of authenticity that cannot be wholly resolved by reflective practice are likely to occur in situations where one is confronted with the ethical question of "what should one do...?" (Probert, 1998), because as Neitzsche acutely observed, life is lived forwards, but understood backwards. In other words, the person is participating in an event, and with others is the architect of its meaning, before the 'reflective practice' of contemplating the significance of that event.

This idea of the 'world-as-event' has been explored by Bakhtin (1981) who maintains that there is a disjunction or gap between immediate experience and symbolic representations of this experience. Bakhtin attempts to reconcile prosaic life (bound to our physical bodies) and cognitive or theoretical thinking (free to move as it pleases) in a concept of the *answerable act*, where ethical responsibility arises out of the actualization of both the repeated and the unique in specific social events. Bakhtin finds both aesthetic and theoretical thinking problematic precisely because they abstract what they imagine to be 'important' from actual events located within real time and space, and gain life of their own within this abstract realm of thinking. Retrospective mediation, such as reflective practice, employing aesthetic intuition or theoretical thinking divide the content of an act (its product) from the act itself (or its actual historical performance).

Bakhtin makes a special effort to reunite the aesthetic (the shaping of meaning in action) and the ethical (a cognitive element of the act itself) into one unified event, and suspects Kantian transcendental a prioris cannot address ethical problems and dilemmas as they emerge within the everyday lifeworld:

"'Man-in-general' does not exist; I exist and a particular concrete *other* exists. If I remain in communion with immediate experience and the concrete other, then I can maintain a relation of *answerability* to other selves and the world at large, and can accept full responsibility for my actions and words. Because my participation in the world is unique and non-recurrent, shared by no other person, no one else can accept responsibility on my behalf. This explains Bakhtin's striking phrase: there is no 'alibi' in Being. In justifying our deeds by recourse to an abstract ideology or a sociopolitical imperative, we are provided with just such an alibi for evading our responsibility, in which case 'what we have is not an answerable deed but a technical or instrumental action'. If we act purely out of obligation to such abstractions or rationalized expediencies, then we 'turn into imposters or pretenders', and abrogate the onus of answerability" (Gardiner, 1996: 32).

Conclusion: Who Speaks?

Ironically, for technicism and reflective practice, as in most analyses, no *particular* individual ever has to exist, any abstract person will do. Yet the authenticity of the 'moral agent' has to be underwritten in the concrete ethical act or the person need feel no responsibility for their own lives or acts: privileging the abstract and theoretical essentially leads away from responsibility and ethical action, instead of towards it. Theoretical thinking limits the degree to which individuals act responsibly because it locates the most important aspects of an act outside the responsible self participating in the event itself. This may be a grave failing, for it allows individuals to displace their unique responsibilities through appealing to a categorical 'good' posited by theoretical thinking.

The ethics of answerability is provocative for IS because of an acquired mandate to contain the world within immutable, unified systems of concepts and categories: the normalizing of events, the displacement of acts from actions, and the inevitable separation of the prosaic and aesthetic involved in work *textualization* (Zuboff, 1989), conspire against Bakhtin's ethical, authentic self maintaining a relation of answerability with a non-abstract other.

References

Communications of the ACM, 1995, Special Issue on Ethics and Computer Use, 38(12): 30-84.

Bakhtin, M., 1981, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, ed. Micheal Holquist, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist, Austin: Univ. of Texas Press.

Barley, S.R., 1996, Foreward, In*: Talking about machines: an ethnography of a modern job*, by J.E. Orr, NY: Cornell University Press.

Carr, D., 1997, The uses of literacy in teacher education, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 45(1): 53-68.

Gardiner, M., 1996, Foucault, ethics and dialogue, *History of the Human Sciences*, 9(3): 27-46.

Halliday, J., Technicism, refective practice and authenticity in teacher education, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 14(6): 597-605.

Probert, S.K., 1998, Ethical Codes, Methodological Precepts and Authenticity in Information Systems Development, *Proc. 4th Americas Conference on Information Systems*, Baltimore, August 14-16. pp 844-846.

Schon, D.A., 1987, *Educating the reflective practitioner*, SF: Josey-Bass.

Walsham, G., 1996, Ethical theory, codes of ethics and IS practice, *Information Systems Journal*, 6, 69-81.

Stephens, R.A., 1997, Dialogism: A Bakhtinian perspective on communication, *Proc. Fifth International Conference of the United Kingdom Systems Society*, In: Systems for Sustainability: People, Organizations and Environments, Eds., FA Stowell, RL Ison, R Armson, J Holloway, S Jackson and S McRobb, NY: Plenum, pp 513-517.

Stephens, R.A., 1999 (forthcoming), Shared alterity in interpretive research: a case of mistaken identity?, *United Kngdom Systems Society: 6th International Conference.*

Wood-Harper, A.T., Corder, S., Wood, J.R.G. and Watson, H., 1996, How we profess: the ethical systems analyst, *Comms. of the ACM*, March 39(3): 69-77.

Zuboff, S., 1989, *In the Age of the Smart Machine: The Future of Work and Power*, Oxford: Heinemann.