

Chapter 18

Ethics, Authenticity and Emancipation in Information Systems Development

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes research in progress on the philosophical concept of authenticity – used as a framing device for providing an interpretation of aspects of both ethical and practical action on the part of information systems (IS) professionals. Ethical codes and prescriptive IS development methods for IS professionals can be found in most developed countries in the world. Here it is argued that ethical codes and IS methods may be of limited value in IS work. One key problem here is that IS analysts and designers have to *intervene* in organisations (and thereby intervene in the lives of the members of those organisations). It is argued that an important issue for IS research is whether they choose to do so in (what will be characterised as) an *authentic* manner, rather than doing so in sincere adherence with either a code of professional ethics or with a series of methodological precepts.

PERSONAL AUTHENTICITY AND ETHICAL CODES

Firstly, to characterise the concept of authenticity, a brief explanation will be given. Given that there is a lack of *absolute* guidance as to how one is to act in any given situation, the question of “what should one do...?” raises severe difficulties. Some sorts of authenticity questions may be familiar to the readers of this chapter. As a consultant, the author experienced several authenticity problems, a few are given as example questions here:

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This chapter appears in the book, *Ethical Issues of Information Systems* by Ali Salehnia.
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1. Should I use a methodology which has embedded values that I do not agree with?
2. Should I use a methodology which, in my judgement, is wholly inappropriate to the circumstances pertaining in the organisation?
3. Should I attempt to improve organisational performance by introducing greater accountability in a low-wage organisation?

These are difficult ethical questions, and whilst some of these may be covered by the codes of conduct and practice of professional IS bodies, others may not be (see Walsham, 1996). Also, such decisions require degrees of interpretation, and therefore judgements about such matters are likely to vary from person to person. In any case, not all IS professionals are members of professional societies, and not all those members may be aware of the codes of conduct and practice, and no doubt some will choose to ignore such things. More importantly, adherence to any such code is unlikely to be practically *enforceable*; adherence will therefore have to be “granted” voluntarily by the IS professionals concerned:

“In the scientific community the medical specialist has better defined ethical codes than most other groups... They are also enforced by powerful sanctions such as expulsion from the medical profession if serious infringements occur. Many other professionals, including the British Computer Society, have also drawn up ethical codes but these are often vague and difficult to apply and enforce... Ethical responsibilities will also vary both with the nature of work that is being carried out and the nature of the social environment where the work is conducted.” (Mumford, 1995, p. 6)

Because the value of ethical codes are limited, the sorts of questions characterised above (which all IS professionals must probably face from time to time) may best be understood as questions of *personal authenticity*, rather than being understood as strictly *ethical* questions. Indeed, it has been suggested that, “[T]he concept of authenticity is a protest against the blind, mechanical acceptance of an externally imposed code of values.” (Golomb, 1995, p. 11)

The concept of authenticity is often primarily connected to considerations put forward by Nietzsche (1844-1900). Nietzsche’s statements and concerns about such issues are a constant theme in his texts (especially 1956 and 1974). Cooper elaborates the concept of authenticity via some examples from teaching. He explicates the problems thus:

“A familiar disturbance felt by the teacher arises when some of these [educational] policies, values, or whatever, are not ones to which he can subscribe... The disturbance produces a problem of authenticity, for unless the teacher resigns or is willing to invite considerable friction at work, he must simulate agreement to views that are not his. [Alternatively] ... The

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