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Ethics for IT: A short Weberian excursus
Darryl Coulthard
School of Information Systems
Deakin University
Melbourne, Australia
Email: darryl.coulthard@deakin.edu.au

The paper uses the famous conclusion of Max Weber’s Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism to open up the debate about ethics and the role of the professional. The paper identifies the key concerns of Weber in his conclusion and considers the implications for the development of IT ethics and the IT professional and the development of a professional response.

Keywords
Modernity, instrumental reason, professional ethics, social values.

INTRODUCTION
The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt. In Baxter’s view, the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the "saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment." But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage.

Since asceticism undertook to remodel the world and to work out its ideals in the world, material goods have gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history. Today the spirit of religious asceticism whether finally, who knows? has escaped from the cage. But victorious capitalism, since it rests on mechanical foundations, needs its support no longer. The rosy blush of its laughing heir, the Enlightenment, seems also to be irretrievably fading, and the idea of duty in one’s calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs. Where the fulfilment of the calling cannot directly be related to the highest spiritual and cultural values, or when, on the other hand, it need not be felt simply as economic compulsion, the individual generally abandons the attempt to justify it at all. In the field of its highest development, in the United States, the pursuit of wealth, stripped of its religious and ethical meaning, tends to become associated with purely mundane passions, which often actually give it the character of sport.

No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: "Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of, civilization never before achieved" (Weber, 1958: 182).

This forms part of the famous conclusion by Max Weber in his groundbreaking and seminal work “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism” which commenced publication in 1904. Certainly it is Weber, breaking free of cautious sociology, sounding something like an Old Testament prophet and the reference to the burning of fossilised coal is strangely contemporary but the reader may ask, what relevance does this have to the study of computer and professional ethics 100 years on? This paper

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computer, IT and IS professionals. The paper attempts to show that modern professional work entails a separation of ethics from efficiency and effectiveness concerns and that as a consequence ethics issues are marginalised and weakened by contrast to the centrality of efficiency and effectiveness. The paper is part of a larger project the ethics and the IT profession and this paper attempts to identify, using the quotation, the key problems and forces underpinning the difficulties facing the IT professional and the professional guilds in developing and maintaining an ethical stance in their work.

THE IRRESISTIBLE FORCE AND THE IRON CAGE

In simple and popular terms, "the irresistible force" that Weber refers to has been often been called "the march of progress", the "march of reason" and those of a more radical persuasion the "march of capitalism". For many they amount pretty much to the same thing and each of these expressions form part of the underlying assumptions of many IT professionals. As scientists and scholars, the IT professions seek to discover and invent an contribute to the march of reason. As practitioners, IT professionals, the interventions they make into the world are typically intended to contribute to progress, and finally as business consultants and employees, there is a clear intention to contribute to capitalist enterprise.

As IT professionals concerned with ethics, we must look closely at the values and assumptions underpinning these commonplace views. As values they hold a particular stance towards human conduct and intervention and have important implications for how we act in our profession. To so do, we need to first discuss this "irresistible force" in some detail. For Weber, this force is not any form of reason, but the development of what Weber termed 'instrumental reason' and for him and many who have variously taken his work seriously argue that the emergence of this type of reasoning underpins and for many, characterises, the modern age.

Instrumental reason is the separation of the means -- how one gets to the end point most efficiently and effectively -- from the end or goal of the means. That is, what one is trying to do is seen to be distinct from how one may try to do it. This distinction appears so commonplace and obvious that the modern reader is often blind to earlier forms of reasoning and consequently to the implication of this form reasons for ethics, professions and society at large. Instrumental reasoning can be contrasted with 'value rationality' where the end goals are not split from efficiency and effectiveness concerns and form part of the reasoning process.

Weber developed his theory of bureaucracy upon instrumental rationality. Weber's concern was to identify what was the most 'rational' -- ie effective and efficient organisational structure. Information Systems in particular uses instrumental reasoning to identify the most efficient and effective information system to achieve the ends of the organisation. The purpose of the bureaucratic manager, the IT expert is to deploy their knowledge of a given situation to identify and implement a solution or practical outcome that meets the needs and goals of the organisation or client.

The key point for this discussion is that the IT expert is not concerned, at least in his or her capacity as an expert, with the ends, themselves. The means are amenable to reason and science but the ends are external to the exercise. From this instrumental perspective (one that MacIntyre (1981) terms 'emotivism') values are not amenable to reason and are in this sense arbitrary and irrational. The ends are subject to the intentions of governments, shareholders or those who speak for them. Values, laws and social customs may form an enveloping constraint on the efficiency and effectiveness of a solution but values themselves remain external to the task of the expert.

The melancholy observation of Weber's that 'reason' had been reduced and narrowed to servicing the economic machine is but one aspect. That this is 'irresistible' with no obvious alternative adds to the melancholia. It is irresistible in the sense that it is almost impossible to think of an alternative mode of reasoning to the current situation where ethics -- the discussion of ends -- is external to the enterprise. The practical implication is that for the expert, values are not his or her concern, as an expert. He or

44 For brevity, I will term all computer, IT and IS professionals, scientists, engineers and academics in the following as "IT professionals"
she is not qualified, as an expert, to judge or comment on the ethics of the ends. They are structurally and practically separated from such ethics. Ethics or goals are a matter for the shareholders or whoever is paying for the service. This, as Bauman (1989) has persuasively argued is part of the fundamental mechanism that produced the horrors of the Nazi genocide. The experts, professionals, soldiers and managers undertook their tasks with lesser or greater zealotry or with lesser or greater misgivings. Engineers solved technical problems of horrible genesis and designed more and more effective genocidal machines that their masters lawfully asked them to produce. Were IT as central to the economy and administration of the Third Reich there seems little doubt that it would have been applied with frightening efficiency and effectiveness. Indeed, there is some evidence that IT was used by the Nazis to more easily identify Jews and other groups of interest (cf Dillard, 2003).

The business of ends is not the business of the expert qua expert. It may be suggested at this point that such ends is the business of the professional. The IT professional as opposed to the expert does, or at least should, consider the ends of his or her work. Whether or not IT professionals have the ability and willingness to consider ends and to what degree, is an empirical question and is one that needs to be examined. It seems unlikely that IT professionals are well prepared to take on the ethics of their actions of, say, issues of privacy, copyright protection, workforce deskilling and so on. It is clear that the discussion of ends is in practice peripheral or marginal to their expertise.

IT professionals at the Australian Wheat Board may have been aware or might have made it their duty to be aware of the illegal and unethical dealings of the AWB. IT professionals in the US would almost certainly have known of the dealings of the Enron. These are difficult and complex matters and it appears overly moralistic and harsh to blame these professionals for failing in moral courage and conviction to blow the whistle. The uncoupling of means and ends undermines the role of the professional and advances the technical prowess of the expert.

IT is part of the project of modernity – the drive for efficiency and effectiveness - finding the best route to a given end that an organisation can take. The IT expert (as an ideal type) is amoral at the service of the organisation and within the bounds of the law. The IT expert is not really paid or recruited for anything more. To this extent the IT professional is an anachronism and a hindrance to industry. This is the IT professionals 'iron cage' where it becomes almost impossible to argue against a given end as the professional is not directly responsible for that end. It would be difficult, say to argue against providing poor and unreliable software that may well be the best commercial solution, one that gives the shareholders the maximum return. A cost benefit analysis may demonstrate this. The IT professional may well shrug his or her shoulders in face of this argument – they aren't responsible for the decision. It may be one thing to argue against something that is illegal but another to argue against what may well be good business practice.

THE ROSY BLUSH OF ITS LAUGHING HEIR, THE ENLIGHTENMENT, SEEMS ALSO TO BE IRRETRIEVABLY FADING

This is an extraordinarily prescient statement from Weber, written as it was at the apogee of the modern age, some ten years prior to the first disaster of the First World War, where the mechanised age marched into mud and blood. It is a postmodern statement. In one sense his view is incorrect, the 20th century, the big ideas of the Enlightenment (cf. Bauman, 1989) went off with a bang – Nazism and Stalinism, rather than a whimper. However, taking a long view there is indeed some argument to suggest that our ideas are indeed exhausted and our focus on the ‘purely mundane passions’ of capital accumulation and consumerism (Ritzer, 2004).

Turning this view onto the IT profession, there is some argument to suggest that most of our efforts are on the ‘purely mundane passions’. For all the professional talk of an information revolution, our ideas seem somewhat stuck on developing more efficient information systems, eCRM, iPods and so on. There appear to be few big ideas outside of commercial success or increased business efficiency. Few IT professionals are leading or substantially contributing to the progressive and regressive effects of IT and how IT can aid social and environmental reform.
SPECIALISTS WITHOUT SPIRIT, SENSUALISTS WITHOUT HEART

A specialist without spirit, a sensualist without heart is the expert. What appears lacking is the notion of vocation, of calling. A casual inspection of the typical job description for any professional job will list a range of skills and attributes. In general terms, the successful applicant will be able to address or demonstrate the following: demonstrate the prerequisite technical skills, capabilities and qualifications, demonstrate project and people management skills required the level of position and provide examples of quality work and work of complexity and significance. The applicant inter alia may also directly address their interpersonal and communication skills including their ability to work in teams and others.

The picture that emerges from the job description is one of the professional who has the expertise to do the job and preferably excel in the technical and managerial challenges placed before him or her. It also means that the professional has in the past worked well with organisations and with those people in the organisation: that the professional can work well within the social and organisational constraints of the modern organisation and finally they are more or less personable and can work well with others.

The ability to work well with others usually tails the key selection criteria, partly because it is difficult to demonstrate directly other than via referees, partly because there is the assumption that those who don’t work well with others typically don’t do that well within organisations unless the job is especially esoteric or technical and partly that those who cannot work that well have beenweed out in previous jobs.

Finally, there may be some prescription, most commonly in NGO and government organisations that the person can work within the values of the organisation. This is only rarely addressed in the selection criteria and even more rarely tested or examined closely in interview. The assumption here seems to be that the values of the organisation tend to be self selecting. By all these criteria, people, not surprisingly and unremarkably, are selected for their efficiencies and effectiveness, not their values and their willingness to stand by them.

Current ethical theories place the individual in a precarious position. On the one hand, the self is the arbiter of all moral values but on the other the self works in organisations where values are taken as given (Macintyre, 1981:33). The individual is very much caught in a ‘take it or leave it’ bind. The self historically has been a locus of social relations; one is what one’s role and place within the community. There is ample evidence now to suggest that at least in the West, our identity is no longer to be found in these collective, social relations (Beck, 1992; Sennett, 1998; Putnam, 2000). To this extent, our ability to make moral choices, working with others to develop a position is far weaker. This is well illustrated in Hariman and Lucaites (2007) work on iconic photographs whey they show the movement from the collective effort such as raising the US Flag on Iwo Jima to that of the lone man facing the tanks in Tiananmen Square. It would seem as if we have now God like responsibilities for moral decision but little means to decide or to act collectively on our moral responsibility. We may exhort ourselves to be more ethical but there may be something wrong with our selves and our ethics.

While Weber appears to be speaking of the stripping away of value from the expert in his statement, we can glimpse too the emergence of a fragile self, trapped in the mechanisms and procedures of the organisation: Weber’s iron cage.

NEW PROPHETS: HOW SHOULD WE THINK ABOUT ETHICS?

Weber ends pessimistically: he had no answer. Postmodernism is itself an expression of this view. Like Chou En Lai’s response to the question of the effect of the French Revolution, whether there are new prophets or the refurbishment of old ideas, it is too “early to tell”. Nevertheless, there are changes, and there has indeed been the re-emergence of the old ideas of Aristotelian ethics through work of Maclntyre (1981), new ideas with the work of Bauman (1993) and also the emergence of a critical business ethics informed by social and organisational critique and recent ethical theory (Jones, Parker and ten Bos (2005).
MacIntyre argues that the Enlightenment, following its general scientific critique of Aristotle, jettisoned Aristotle's teleological scheme while retaining it ethical precepts. Aristotle's teleological scheme as it applied to morality was 'man-as-he-happens-to-be', 'man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realised his-essential-nature' and the application practical reason and the virtues aimed at assisting man's realisation of his essential nature. The Enlightenment stripped the guiding principles – the practical manual for living the good life – and elevated it to law-like, external forces on everyday conduct. Human beings were no longer conceived of as human 'becomings' or 'works-in-progress' that were using ethical precepts as guides but as finished, autonomous selves acting independently in the world and constrained by moral forces. Again we see here in the Enlightenment an overweening view of the self divorced from its social location.

The alternative view is to consider morality as a process of becoming which is grounded in the conduct of everyday life and engagement in social life and practice and where the development of moral character takes precedence over the following of rules. MacIntyre suggests the redevelopment of virtue ethics. This moves morality from the realm of society and of rules and regulations to that of everyday practices and concerns.

Bauman (1993) provides a complementary view to MacIntyre. Bauman' (1989, 1993) essential insight, following his work on the Holocaust, is the corrupting influence of social institutions and that by following ethical, laws rules or guidelines and that by following such rules 'we put morality to sleep'. This view echoes Macintyre's view that ethics and the self as unfinished process of becoming.

Finally, Coulthard (2005) and Jones et al (2005) provide a critique of current textbooks and teaching of business and IT ethics. In particular, they note that most professional and business textbooks severely circumscribe ethics to a narrow area of philosophy and professional practice. They argue that most textbooks confine ethical theory to the Enlightenment theories of the 18th and 19th Century. Ethical issues, they argue are further limited to particular issues and an individualist approach to ethics is encouraged. However, many ethical problems and dilemmas are social and political problems that cannot simply be resolved by our individual action. As with MacIntyre and Bauman, ethics is not a set of clearly defined problems facing an individual but a particular perspective and way of living the good life.

The key issues facing the development of IT ethics must involve the profession wrestling with the concerns of modernity and recognise the iron cage of which it is part. It must as Jones et al (2005) suggest broaden its concerns from a focus of the individualistic ethics to one that encompasses a greater understanding of the social, organisational and political context in which ethics operate and choices are taken. It must, to use a recent expression, embed the ethical in all aspects of professional and social life (McDonald, 2007).

REFERENCES


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