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Kristo Ivanov

Department of Informatics, Umea University, kivanov@informtik.umu.se

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Umeå University, Department of Informatics, S-901 87 UMEÅ (Sweden)

Phone +46 90 166030, Fax +46 90 166550, Email: kivanov@informatik.umu.se

Introduction

The concept of design of inquiring system (DIS) as advanced in the 1970's (Churchman, 1971) seemed to be a good candidate for a philosophical basis for future uses of information technology (IT). The emphasis was on the relation between science and philosophy, especially ethics, in terms of a modern interpretation of the classic philosophers Leibniz, Locke, Kant, Hegel, plus the American philosopher Edgar Singer Jr, combined with "Aristotelian" teleological information (decision or choice). Since then, however, the development of IT, especially in its multimedial developments, has enhanced also the aesthetic dimension. We are nowadays facing the still more complex but philosophically old and classical task of relating science to both ethics and aesthetics: the true, the good, and the beautiful.

At the same time DIS has not kept up with these developments. Philosophy itself has consolidated its bad reputation for being an "ugly" word in most IT-contexts, the more so in the light of postmodern cultural tendencies that tend to dilute philosophy in an ocean of different "-isms". Computer supported cooperative work (CSCW), as earlier group decision support, seems to incorporate more of a Lockean consensus, rather than Hegelian, not to mention Marxist, conflict management. The Internet and the World Wide Web are expected to encourage both pluralism and consensus by means - in DIS language - of a Lockean reliance on supposed unproblematic positivistic facts, interrelated by Leibnizian fact nets. The road that was pointing from Hegelian philosophy towards Singerian progress does seem to point nowhere, or, then, it points to "more and faster", in the shadow of the postmodernism that succeeded progress.

Philosophy in four books

Does anybody need philosophy in the IS- field? Is DIS forgotten or relegated to the museum of honorable superficial references with no real "use" by today's researchers? It seems absurd to question that a lot of successful work has been done with no other need of philosophy than what is popularly known as management philosophies. These refer to practical guidelines and advices given by consultants, and proeminent people in the field. It has been noted, however, that we sometimes live "The Myth of Management" (Churchman, 1968, pp. 17-29): if we are to be honest about our ignorance, we will have to admit that some managers become great simply because there is common agreement that they are great, but we must also admit that all agreement is a dangerous basis for rational conclusions. We could add that if we conceive science as including the management of science this insight is applicable not only to managers but also scientists and consultants, including their account of success stories that seem to dispense of philosophy.

Philosophical considerations are nonetheless disappearing from main works on IS, in favour of non-systemic emphasis on observation and logic alone. The ignored philosophical, and consequently also methodological dimensions show up, however, in the form of ethical symptoms. Some of them will be surveyed below by highlighting one key passage from each of four books that know DIS, and yet do not seem to espouse its main teaching.

An ambitious work on IT that is co-authored by a scholar that can be considered to pertain to the DIS-tradition (McKenney, 1995), offers historical accounts of successful innovations and successful implementations of IT innovations. It refers to successful leaders, and success stories. It does so without ever dwelling on problems of historical research and, in particular, on the concept of success or on the ethical "good". No theoretical references are given with the exception (p. 2) of J.A. Schumpeter's classic "Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy", and of some recent organizational theorists (p. 35) that discuss "Information Technology and Tomorrow's Manager". Philosophy and ethics are not even to be found in the

word index, and that is to be (paradoxically?) explained in that it aims at business leaders. If the reader wants to understand better the the methodological, if not the ethical, problems involved in success-stories, he may have to rely on a trade journal. The Economist, for instance (The Economist, 1996), reports new research about market leaders and the care that was taken to avoid hindsight when defining firms as pioneers.

Another book in, or near the DIS-tradition (Mitroff, Mason, & Pearson, 1994) does not advertise any philosophical ambitions since (despite?) it deals with the radical redesign of American Business. It has, however, such ambitions, and claims (p. 85) that business concerns move into the realm of theology and philosophy. It regrets (p. 88) that theories of organization seldom give consideration to purpose and meaning, and that even when purpose is acknowledged, it is often expressed in terms of serving narrow goals. Does this narrowing occur also in the DIS-application of Singer's own conceptions? Indeed, the authors go on (p. 89) confessing that Singer left the impression that a combination of mechanics and teleology is sufficient to explain the world, and they question whether what they call spirituality can be reduced to one of Singer's types of scientific explanation. But, then they revert to the pragmatism of William James and his question (quoted from The Varieties of Religious Experience) of "Why, after all, may not the world be so complex as to consist of many interpenetrating spheres of reality, which we can thus approach in alternation by using different conceptions and assuming different attitudes?...In this view religion and science, each verified in its own way from hour to hour and from life to life, would be co-eternal". In this way, the classical and difficult problem of relation between philosophy, theology, and science is reduced to a trivial status that allows for pluralism and relativism. Symptomatically enough, later in the book (p. 123) reference is made to Alcoholics Anonymous' expression "A Power greater than ourselves" but the authors, disregarding the same source's subsequent use of only "God", hasten to remark that this Power can obviously be interpreted as God, but it need not be: prayer and meditation are indeed said (p. 128) to be only examples of the immense number of ways, such as art and literature, that human beings have developed and exercised creativity. God and religion in general, and Christianity in particular, are put at the same conceptual level as the environmental movement or other spirituals movements.

In a third book, also co-authored by a scholar near the DIS-tradition (Mason, Mason, & Culnan, 1995) philosophy and philosophers are richly referenced and elegantly summarized, let it be that "Aristotelian" classical teachings on sin by the Catholic Church (Catechism, § 1866) are attributed (p. 125) to Kurt Weill's The Threepenny Opera. When it comes to evaluate or synthesize the various schools, however, a lame respect is paid to everybody including utilitarianism, that is described as "a widely used and respected ethical theory" (p. 140). The direction is indeed towards pluralism since (p. 148) "at the beginning of the examination of an ethical issue, all relevant theories are presumed to have equally valid moral force. These prima facie claims can be broken only by demonstrating (sic) that some other principle supersedes the principle being replaced...The final arbiter...is the concept of justice". So much for the "fundamentals" of ethics that are later to be applied in the book. Never mind that the whole work by Kant, who is also acknowledged in the text, can be seen as an indictment of utilitarianism. Ant how are we to demonstrate principles and supersedure? (Lewis, 1988, "On ethics".)

A fourth book, in the Scandinavian tradition (Dahlbom, & Mathiassen, 1993), pays, as many others, nominal homage to DIS that is displayed in the reference list. It claims to encompass philosophical aspects of IS. It also contains rich references to philosophy despite of not really addressing the most important part of philosophy concerning ethics. An inconclusive wandering along various contexts of the concept of "good" subsumed under "quality" (pp. 147ff) ultimately relegates purpose to the "traditional" world where we would be supposed to act in accordance with tradition or we do what we have always done. In contrast, in a modern world, it is said, we put a premium on initiative, on breaking with tradition, we formulate goals for our actions but we are never content in reaching them while we are encouraged by our quality control ideals: every attempt to define the morally good will break down and reveal a lack to be dealt with by further attempts (p. 155). All this argument in the book recalls the pragmatist Singer-Peirce conception of ever approaching ideals, but without any requirement of approach, that is, with no control and commitment.

I used four examples from books that are supposed to work with knowledge of the DIS-tradition. The philosophical and ethical or theological concerns of DIS with frequent reference to God and the "guarantor"

in decision and IS are absent or are reduced to issues at a lower level. Singerian ideals on final purposes are interpreted as narrow goals. In consulting, for instance, with a car manufacturer, ethical ideals become soon the ideal car, and the latter is translated into the utopian beautiful, safe, cheap, and profitable car to be designed by means of aesthetic intuition and participative negotiation.

Towards a program of research

It is therefore disturbing that this state of affairs that portrays the philosophical progress, or, rather, the lack of it, during the last twenty years does not seem to be matched by a deeper scholarly concern for the issue. Let us disregard most of DIS' students who seem to return to solid good old pragmatism or utilitarianism when doing consultancy for big business or government helping it to sell salties, beer, environmentalism, or equal opportunity policies.

While this happens I cannot avoid perceiving an increasingly "sentimental" or "preaching" tone and mood in the later DIS messages from what is left of the best DIS-tradition. This seems to indicate and increasing disenchantment with the sad fact that the world does not seem to care for ethical categorical imperatives or "solitary injunctions". My thesis is that an increasing sentimentality and preaching approach to what originally constituted philosophical and ethical issues of IS denounces serious shortcoming of earlier intellectual approaches. If the IS-community is not going to fall "from ashes into fire", that is from Kantian enlightenment into Nietzschean postmodern perspectivism and sentimental aestheticism, one must appeal to that sort of philosophy that incorporates more of spiritualism or outright theology. In order to do so we investigate some of the roots of pragmatism and of the criticism that has been leveled against it, and we propose the incorporation of some other literature that has been apparently ignored in IS-research.

In the meantime, preaching goes under obviously righteous banners such as "Toward a just society for future generations" (Churchman, 1990), or paraphrasing E.F. Schumacher's "as if people mattered". This was preceded by a long series of provoking "Churchman's conversations" in the journal Systems Research (from its Vol. 1, No. 1, 1984, and continuing for several years). The arguments, curiously enough, seem to remain stuck in Kant's philosophy or, rather, in his worn-out cathegorical imperative that C.S. Lewis called solitary injunction. A recent paper on ethics (Churchman, 1995) does not seem to reach any further. Why ought humanity be preserved? (Lewis, 1988, p. 73).There seem to be no further compelling motives along those sentimental lines. A few serious European scholars, however, try to stretch, and perhaps even to deepen a bit the tradition, avoiding, at least, the sentimental mood (Romm, 1994; Ulrich, 1996a; Ulrich, 1996b). This is achieved through recourse to the latest European philosophical fads, for instance, first Habermas, and now Foucault. But, then, it stops.

There is, per se, nothing wrong in preaching even if, then, it is safer to preach THE Gospel, rather than an unidentified philosophical gospel.(Lewis, 1988, pp. 76-79.) All this lead me to struggle with these issues in other contexts (Ivanov, 1993; Ivanov, 1995). My hypothesis is that this possibly sentimental turn in the DIS-tradition and its difficulty to educate in depth its most influential students is contingent to the failure of IS-work to integrate science and technology with ethics, aesthetics, and religion. In particular, it has to do with its inability to transcend the basic tenets of philosophical pragmatism in close contact with American business and its unquestioned technology.

We may have to come to terms with that those taints of pragmatism that M.C. D'Arcy called (1944, pp. 3ff, 49ff) called a modernist heresy against the mind and a suicidal view of reason that was overinfluenced by the idea of progress and the limitations of the human mind (Kant). He saw this view as denying any real separation of priority of spirit life, denying intellectualism: life would the test and criterion of truth, as serviceableness is of any instrument. As such knowledge could not hold the place of honour, the absolute and final character which traditional philosophy gave to it, and that is "sanctified" in our Western belief in freedom of expression.

Postmodern tendencies in science today make things even worse. These insights are indeed echoed in certain older studies of technology that I, finally, claim must be revived and developed in order to focus

especially IT. I think that a philosophical understanding of IT requires that we come to terms with what George Grant called the pervasiveness of "comfortable self-preservation" of pragmatic liberalism (Grant, 1972, pp. 190, 196). I think that this striving for comfortable self-preservation, albeit in the name of apparent altruism, contributes to the sterility of the sentimental turn of Kantian-DIS-philosophy and ethics. The "theory of greed" that Churchman himself looks for in his late work (Churchman, 1995, p. 271), and, earlier, Singer's unquestioned search for technological power are the same greed and thirst for power that others theoretically associate with the philosophical emancipation from traditional Christian restraints (Grant, 1972, pp. 191; Lewis, 1972). Vague pluralistic "spirituality" and private religion will not do. When dealing with technology we cannot evade futher to struggle with these insights and with a problematization of the meaning of "use" of technology (Jonas, 1972, pp. 336ff; Simon, 1972, p. 173ff). It is a use that widely transcends the narrow limits of the pragmatist philosophical tradition to which The Design of Inquiring Systems, despite of it all, basically still pertains. Many of the information, knowledge and IT-use issues that today are being discussed in basic and applied IS research call into question matters that "unfortunately" revive Aristotelian metaphysics and scholastic philosophy. That is no easy, and still less, profitable, way.

And, yet, I claim that in the whole IS-field today there is no better door for students and scholars into philosophy, ethics, and theology than the original book on The Design of Inquiring Systems.

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