Erasmus, Luther and the Free Will Debate: Influencing the Philosophy of Management 500 Years on –whether we realise it or not!

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Conference Submission

Almost exactly 500 years ago Martin Luther putatively posted his 95 theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on the 31st of October 1517. It was event that changed world history and the date is still celebrated as Reformation Day[1]. The 95 theses (2018) largely dealt with the application of Church teaching on purgatory and in particular what Luther (and others) considered to be the abuse of indulgences. For many, this is still the *raison d'être* of the Reformation cemented in the Protestant saw "as soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs". However Luther's posting of the 95 theses, a common academic practice of that time, was a call for disputation rather than proposing alternative dogmas. One of the greatest debates of that era was between Desiderius Erasmus and Martin Luther. Erasmus had published a tract *De libero arbitrio* (On Free Will) in 1524 and Luther published his riposte *De Servo Arbitrio* (On the bondage of the Will) in 1525. The question at the heart of their disagreement was the dilemma of the nature of free will (or un-free will) in relation to salvation. Luther in fact praises his opponent Erasmus in *De Servo Arbitrio* as being the only one who had uncovered the real issue and had "not wearied me with irrelevancies about the papacy, purgatory, indulgences and such like trifles ….You and you alone have seen the question on which everything hinges" (McSorley, 1970 p. 365) .

This paper will claim that the current polarisation in management research philosophy, in particular between advocates of Positivism and Interpretivism, has its roots in this pivotal debate between Erasmus and Luther. Furthermore, I will argue that the lack of realisation of the origins of the conflict has serious implications for the integrity and development of management scholarship. What philosophers call the "Free-will problem" is alive and thriving in mainstream philosophical debates and "is one of the oldest and hardest problems in philosophy" Pink (2004 p.2). Ignorance or disregard of such a fundamental debate is both unacceptable and damaging to the current discourse in management research. Additionally, I propose that the argument of my paper is supported by the following quotation from the

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[1] Despite being considered an "article of faith" by many Protestants, according to Roper (2016), Luther only said that he had sent the theses in the form of a letter to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz on that day.

recent ground-breaking study of Luther by the distinguished historian, Lyndal Roper (2016 p. 288).

> The implications of the denial of free will for Luther's understanding of human psychology and motivation were immense, and it is a doctrine which many, then and now, have found hard to accept. Yet his view shares much with philosophical positions which see human action as determined by social, economic, or unconscious forces, and regard our sense that we are 'choosing' to act in a certain way as an illusion.

The proposed structured of the paper is as follows. First an overview of the current debate on free will in the philosophical literature will be presented. Then there will be a reflection on Erasmus and Luther and their positions on the free will dilemma. This will be followed by a discussion of the philosophical underpinning of current research in the management information systems discipline vis-à-vis the Erasmus-Luther debate. Finally some implications for the direction of the philosophy of management research will be suggested.

Now a brief outline of each of these main subsections is provided.

The Free-Will Problem in Philosophy

Kapitan (1999 p. 326) describes the free will problem as the "the problem of the nature of free agency and its relations to the origins and conditions of human behaviour". Consequently the "controversy over conditions of responsible behaviour forms the predominant historical and conceptual background of the free will problem" (ibid). According to Pink (2004 p. 5) the dispute about the relevance of the will to freedom points to a much deeper dispute about the nature of human action. He points out that the term *will* has been used in a variety of ways by philosophers but probably its most important use is tied into the psychological capacity that a human has for decision making. Furthermore, he proposes that the free will problem as it currently exists is quintessentially a modern problem but argues, importantly for this paper, that the debates in the Middle Ages "have much to teach us" (ibid. 21). Pink contrasts *Casual Determinism* (i.e. "the claim that everything that happens, including our own actions, has already been casually determined to occur") with *Libertarianism* (i.e. "the belief that we do actually possess control over how we act"). He particularly singles out the philosopher Thomas Hobbes who, he contends, in the 17th century heralded a revolution in the theory of human action and how we think about freedom and

even morality. The Hobbesian universe, according to Pink, "is a material deterministic system" (ibid p. 56). This determinism, I will argue underlies, contemporary MIS research and needs to be addressed as such. This section of the proposed paper will trace the development of the free will problem in more detail to support the paper's argument that the Erasmus-Luther dispute has present-day implications for management scholarship.

Erasmus and Free Will

Roper (2016) describes Erasmus as a Renaissance super-star and there is much historical indication of the academic adulation he received from all over Europe. "The dissemination of Erasmus' writings and influence throughout Western Christendom is enormously impressive". Though writing in the *lingua franca* of the time (Latin) there is "massive evidence of translations into the vernaculars" (Dickens & Jones, 2000, p. 287). Furthermore, Dickens and Jones (2000 p. 290) summarises his contribution as follows;

> In attempting to assess Erasmian factors in the development of Christianity in early modern Europe, one should first recall what he set himself to do. Erasmus sought to discover the Christ of the Gospels, to clarify and then expound the written record of Christ's message. This done, by means of a rigorous and scholarly approach to the Scriptures themselves, he was prepared to evaluate Church and society not only in term of doctrinal, ritual and organisational issues, but also those of individual Christian conduct.

Erasmus seemed to be another 450 years ahead of his time in pre-figuring Vatican II by stating in *Sileni Alcibiadis* (1515) that he parts company from those who call the priests, bishops and popes "the Church", when in reality they are only servants of the Church (ibid. p. 99). His significant influence on the intellectual impetus for the Reformation is summed up in one of his last letters of the year 1524 that includes Erasmus' citation of the utterance attributed to the Franciscans of Cologne "I laid the egg, Luther hatched it", at which he demurs for "I laid a poultry egg; Luther hatched a very different bird" (ibid. p. 138). This section will be extended to specifically examine Erasmus' free will argument in more detail.

Luther and (un) Free Will

According to Roper (2016 p. 2), the Reformation was instigated by the single text of an Augustinian monk lecturing in an unlikely place; a tiny new impoverished university in the obscure muddy town of Wittenberg. Luther's Reformation was fuelled by the invention of the printing press and a deep German-Italian political and ecclesiastical antipathy. In a

remarkably short time it "sundered the unity of the Catholic Church for ever and can even be credited with starting the process of secularisation in the West". In his examination of sixteenth century philosophy and based on *Weimarer Ausgabe* VII 615; the standard edition of Luther's works, Kenny (2010 p. 506) concludes that "God, Luther maintains, foresees nothing contingently. 'He foresees, purposes, and does all things, according to His immutable, eternal, and infallible will. This thunderbolt throws free will flat and utterly dashes it to pieces". The section of the proposed paper will be expanded to include more detail on Luther's free will perspective and examine the main thrust of his debate with Erasmus,

Philosophical Underpinning of Management Information Systems

The role and importance of philosophy continues to be a matter of lively debate within the management information systems (MIS) discipline (Butler, 1998; Davison & Martinsons, 2011; Dobson & Love, 2004). Opinions have been presented in leading journals that call for researchers to have a firm philosophical basis to justify their research strategies. Presently, the MIS philosophical underpinning (Myers, 2018) shows MIS research methodology consisting of two streams: quantitative and qualitative. In this taxonomy, qualitative research admits three philosophical perspectives: positivist, interpretive and critical while the quantitative method firmly ties its adherents to positivism. This section will examine this debate further and will include emerging perspectives such as Realism and Phenomenology (Costello, 2017; Mingers, 2004; Mingers, Mutch, & Willcocks, 2013). I will argue that the underpinning of these current debates can be traced to the Erasmus-Luther free will problem.

Implications for Philosophy of Management

This section will explore the implications for the Erasmus-Luther free will debate for MIS scholarship under the following headings:

- Implications for the Positivism, Interpretivism and Critical advocates in MIS
- Implications for the Wider Management Discipline
- Suggestions for a future Philosophy of Management Agenda

The final paper, if chosen, will involve more research on the Free will debate between Erasmus and Luther: e.g. (Miller, Macardle, & Tracy, 2012) . It will also attempt to clarify and contextualise a path from the Theist era of Erasmus and Luther to an Atheistic Modern milieu and argue for a fresh dialogue.

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