

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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Abstract:

Almost exactly 500 years ago, Martin Luther posted his 95 theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, an action that changed the course of world history. The greatest debate of that era was between Desiderius Erasmus, the leading Renaissance Humanist of his generation, and Martin Luther, instigator of the Reformation. 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. This paper makes the claim that the current polarisation in management philosophy, and in particular the paradigm of Positivism, has its roots in this pivotal debate between Erasmus and Luther. 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. Furthermore, as Marx points out, we are not able to shed our history the way a snake sheds its skin. Drawing on Gadamer’s hermeneutic of trust, I propose that this historical realisation and an ensuing balanced debate can enable much needed dialogue between philosophy, religion and the social sciences.

Keywords: Erasmus, Luther, Free Will Debate, Positivism, Philosophy, Reformation

Introduction

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 an event that changed the course of world history and the date is still celebrated as Reformation Day¹. 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, a debate that was carried out in print. 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 claims that the current polarisation in management research philosophy, in particular the advocates of Positivism, 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). Additionally, I propose that the argument of my paper is supported by the following quotation from the recent 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.

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.

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

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 philosophers have used the term *will* in a variety of ways 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). Berofsky (1999) describes determinism as follows:

The view that every event or state of affairs is brought about by antecedent events or states of affairs in accordance with universal causal laws that govern the world.

Furthermore, he says that this view was “advanced by Laplace in the early nineteenth century; he was inspired by Newton’s success at integrating our physical knowledge of the world” (ibid). Consequently, determinists deny the existence of chance, which has led to some interesting debates fuelled by advances in quantum mechanics. Berofsky categorises this worldview into *scientific* or *causal* determinism, *theological* determinism and *logical* determinism. Gardiner (2005) cautions that doctrines affirming historical determinism exhibit wide variation but it is the view of Weatherford (2005) that the thesis is fundamentally simple.

However, he points out that while philosophical luminaries such as James, Hobbes and Hume have been determinists, in more recent times, Honderich has “raised the stakes higher” by concluding that:

Determinism puts in doubt all ‘life-hopes, personal feelings, knowledge, moral responsibility, the rightness of actions, and the moral standing of persons’.

For the purpose of this paper, I will concur with Berofsky’s evaluation of the universal doctrine of determinism, common to all these categories, “that if all actions and choices are determined, then some conclude that free will is an illusion” and “that this conflict generates the problem of free will and determinism”. Later, I will argue that determinism underlies contemporary positivist MIS research and therefore needs to be addressed in the academic debate. This section of the paper has briefly traced the development of the free will problem to support the paper’s argument that the Erasmus-Luther dispute has present-day implications for management scholarship. Now I will provide some background and context to their debate.

Erasmus and Free Will

Roper (2016) describes Erasmus as a Renaissance super-star and there is historical evidence of the academic adulation he received from all over Europe at that time. Levi (1971) calls Erasmus of Rotterdam, the greatest of the renaissance humanists who sought to recover Christendom from the excessive rigidity of its contemporary version of scholasticism, and other deviations from the practice of the Gospel that he captured satirically in *The Praise of Folly*. “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.

According to Dolan (1964) , unlike many great minds, Erasmus enjoyed fame in his own lifetime and his genius radiated a brilliance that has seldom been equalled (p. 8). His dislike of dogma led to his distaste for the tendency in higher education in Europe to the practice of *dialectic*. He lamented that a consequence of this approach resulted in absurd and constant quarrels. Furthermore, these squabbles disturbed peace and unity and it is ironic that he

upbraided Luther as being just another scholastic, because of his pugnacious argumentative style (ibid p. 13). Erasmus' approach is commonly regarded as being gentle and sensitive to others, whom he wished to win over by rational argument, rather than to crush them and prove them wrong, by the force of his writings. Furthermore, he proposed the persuasive scholarship of *rhetoric*, which he considered the study of the meaning and usage of language, as a means to enable the scientific interpretation of the sometimes-unclear sacred texts (ibid p. 14). Moreover, together with similar-minded humanists, he craved the study of the classics; "*The New Learning of the Renaissance*", and advocated the reading of secular works such as those of Dante and Petrarch. His significant influence on the intellectual impetus for the Reformation is summed up in one of his last letters of the year 1524. Here Erasmus' includes a citation of the statement 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).

Important for the thesis of this paper, the works of Erasmus are still relevant today. For example, Rummel (2017) points out that "he often reflected on subjects that invite philosophical inquiry: the influence of nature versus nurture, the relationship between word and thing, the ideal form of government, the nature of faith, and the theory of knowledge". Another concrete example of his present-day influence is the European Union (EU) "Erasmus" programme, which has been in operation since 1987, and has resulted in over two million students moving around the member states of the EU (Rodríguez, Bustillo, & Mariel, 2011). According to Obourne (2013) "the European Commission and scholars emphasize that the ERASMUS programme is a successful example of European integration and a symbol of construction of European identity (p. 182). Also, 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 (Dickens & Jones 2000 p. 99). Furthermore, he deviated considerably from the conventional wisdom of the time, and indeed the teaching of Luther, by considering that salvation outside of the church was a distinct possibility. He claimed in his debate with Luther, the possibility that God's mercy extended to "virtuous pagans" (Miller, Macardle, & Tracy, 2012 p. x) .

The definition of "free will" defended by Erasmus and attacked by Luther is primarily a theological formulation but I believe it is important to relate: "By 'free will' here we understand a power of the human will by which man may be able to direct himself towards or turn away from what leads to eternal salvation" (Erasmus, 2012 p. 6). Erasmus examined in his discourse both modern and ancient views of free will and the action of grace. He distanced himself from

the exaggerated (and to some the heretical) teaching of Pelagius of the role of free will i.e. that once free will had been cured by the grace of God there is no further need of grace (ibid p. 7). Examining works of such luminaries as Augustine, Aquinas and Dun Scotus, he says that those who have overreacted to escape the reliance on human works and merits have “run beyond the pale”. He was perturbed by those who now hold the opinion that “God works evil as well as good deeds in us, and that everything happens out of absolute necessity” (ibid p. 11). According to Erasmus, the exclusion of free will makes God cruel and unjust, punishing people who were not responsible for their sins. Rather he stressed the co-operation of grace with free will. Now I will go-one to examine the development of Luther’s position on free will.

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” (ibid p.2) 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.

Luther’s scholarly formation was at the University of Erfurt where he enrolled in 1501, and which at that time was a hotbed of the *via moderna* (also called the Nominalists). This philosophy had developed during the 15th century mainly as a method for interpreting Aristotle and traced its origins to 14th-century authorities, such as William of Ockham (Kärkkäinen 2017). Luther joined the Augustinian Friars in the summer of 1505 after he made his legendary vow to St. Ann that he would become a monk if he were delivered from a frightening thunderstorm. His remarkable talent soon saw him become a doctor of theology after which he was sent to Wittenberg University as a professor of theology. Before long, he became the preacher at the castle church and superior of the Augustinian house in Wittenberg. Luther during this period, developed an antipathy to philosophy contending that “Reason babbles away with nothing but foolish absurdities (Luther, 2012 p. 65). His riposte to Erasmus, *De Servo*

Arbitrio: The Enslaved Will, was vehement² and long –almost three times as long as Erasmus’ *De Libero Arbitrio: A Discussion or Discourse concerning Free Will*. Much of the beginning of the treatise focuses on the interpretation of scripture or rather as Luther claims, the lack of need for elucidation since to the spiritual person can discern the “interior clarity of Holy Scripture” (ibid p. 47). Thus, there is no need for interpretation, “neither by the Church nor by the Fathers of the Church” (Tracy, 2012 p. ix) In order to defend his position, Luther (2012 p. 105) calls mainly on St. Paul:

Therefore, my Paul stands as the unconquered destroyer of free will, and with one phrase, he lays two armies low. For if we are justified “without works”, all works are condemned whether they are tiny or great; he makes no exceptions but fulminates equally against all.

Luther’s following statement can gauge his trenchant opposition to Erasmus’ position: “I want the defenders of free will to be advised that they deny Christ when they assert free will” (ibid p.114). The purpose of this section was to provide evidence that the antecedent of the current debate in the philosophical literature on the subject of freewill can be found in the 16th century joust of Erasmus and Luther. Now I will examine the influence of the doctrine of Positivism on present-day management philosophy and argue that its tenets mirror the deterministic denial of free will expounded by Luther. The location of my thesis is the discipline of management information systems (MIS). However, Positivism has a significant influence on research in many areas of the social sciences. Now I will provide a brief overview of the tenets of Positivism and its influence in MIS.

Positivism: A Brief Overview

The Positivist movement originated with the French philosopher and sociologist, Auguste Comte, who in the mid-nineteenth century formed a grand theory of the three stages of human thought: religious, metaphysical and scientific; with the final stage being the most productive and valuable (Lacy, 2005). “Comte believed that social reality can be explained only through science and that society’s behaviour can be *determined and governed* (my italics) by natural laws. More importantly, Comte regarded all factual knowledge and phenomena a result of a predictable set of relations or a combination of relations” (Waliaula, 2013). As a result, Positivism became a significant standpoint in social research and hence its implications for the argument of this paper. However, despite his zeal for the primacy of the scientific method based

² This is Erasmus’ own description (c.f. Miller et al. 2012 p. 127)

on observation and a rejection of metaphysics, Comte found it necessary to found a “religion of humanity” towards the end of his life, complete with its saints such as Frederick the Great and Adam Smith (Wernick, 2001). Furthermore, I argue that the religious origins and allegory of Comte’s philosophy supports my investigation of its link to the original theological debate on determinism between Erasmus and Luther. Comte’s categories and hierarchies, of which he was rather fond, rejected Aristotle’s philosophical universe where physics and metaphysics could orbit harmoniously in their different spheres (Daintith & Gjertsen, 1999). Comte’s formulation of his philosophy of *Positivism* contains three principal doctrines (Schön, 1983, p. 32):

- empirical science is not just a form of knowledge but the only source of positive knowledge of the world.
- men’s minds need to be cleansed of mysticism, superstition and other forms of pseudo-knowledge.
- scientific knowledge and technical control should be extended to human society in order to make technology “no longer exclusively geometrical, mechanical or chemical, but also primarily political and moral”.

Schön (1983) laments that the seeds of Positivism were firmly planted in the curricula of American universities and professional schools; a factor which he argues has contributed significantly to the contemporary fissure between research and practice. Furthermore, he concludes that the present difficulty in accommodating contemporary phenomena such as “complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict” stems from the positivist origins of technical rationality. It is worth noting that according to Fotion (2005), logical positivism is now regarded as having run its course and has little support among professional philosophers. This is a very salient point for information systems researchers who are still overwhelmingly positivistic in outlook.

The Vienna Circle (*Weiner Kreis*) has had a significant influence on the development of (Logical) Positivism from circa 1907 to 1930 (Bogen, 2005). The Circle flourished under the leadership of Moritz Schlick and its membership could boast luminaries such as Neurath, Carnap and Feigl with the late but influential addition of Popper. While the *Weiner Kreis* dissolved in the late 1930s due to deaths, emigration and the rise of Nazism, its publications had a strong influence on the development of analytical philosophy (Uebel, 1999). The Circle was extreme in its antipathy to metaphysics and pursued a program of the primacy of scientific knowledge. They saw only “one model of science for both the natural and cultural sciences”

(Hirschheim, Klein and Lyytinen, 1995 p. 146). Now I will examine the influence of Positivism on management research philosophy using the example of MIS.

Positivism in Management Information Systems Research

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 in leading journals have called 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. In this section, I will argue that the underpinning of these current debates can be traced to the Erasmus-Luther free will problem. It should be borne in mind that there are also emerging perspectives in MIS philosophy such as Realism and Phenomenology (Costello, 2017; Mingers, 2004; Mingers, Mutch, & Willcocks, 2013). However, the dominant genre is Positivism and will be the focus of this paper.

According to studies by Dube and Pare, the majority of studies in MIS are done from a positivist philosophical perspective, with one study showing that 87% were so, with 12% being interpretive, and 1% critical (Dube & Pare, 2003). The positivist perspective is accompanied by a broad commitment to the idea that the social sciences should emulate the natural sciences (Lee, 1989). The researcher is seen to play a passive, neutral role, and does not intervene in the phenomenon of interest. Klein and Myers (1999 p. 69) point out that generally speaking, MIS research can be “classified as positivist if there is evidence of formal propositions, quantifiable measures of variables, hypothesis testing, and the drawing of inferences about a phenomenon from a representative sample to a stated population”. The goal of positivism is to replicate the success of natural science in explanation, prediction and control. Very recently some highly respected MIS researchers have attested to the prevalence of the positivistic system in the discipline by concluding that “in numerous institutions around the world, IS investigators are expected to test theories in a positivist fashion” (Kock, Avison, & Malaurent, 2017). Now I will discuss some implications for present-day scholarship arising from the previous sections of the paper.

Discussion

This section will explore the implications of the Erasmus-Luther free will debate for MIS research and for scholarship in the wider management discipline. I believe that unfortunately, the discourse between religion and philosophy in the present era is characterised by much mutual distrust and even antipathy. Furthermore, the dismissal of scientific and social science of its roots in the rigorous academic debates of Christendom requires revisiting. My proposal is that one of the most renowned and influential debates of the later Middle Ages can contribute to redressing this situation and provide a fruitful basis for dialogue. In order to activate this, I will offer the work of the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer as a manifesto for such dialogue.

Implications for Dialogue: Gadamer's Hermeneutic of Trust

Malpas (2005) has described Hans-Georg Gadamer as the decisive figure in the development of twentieth century hermeneutics and indeed his long life spanned the whole of this period from his birth in 1900 to his death in 2002. An important theme of Gadamer was that speech, language, interpretation and understanding is embedded in our historical context and subjected to our prejudices (or pre-judgements). Gadamer engaged in debates with contemporary philosophers such as Habermas, Derrida and Ricoeur together with other public discussions on topics such as understanding between cultures and religions; and the role of science and technology in the modern world. Hermeneutics is the traditional name for the “art of interpretation” which developed from biblical exegesis in ancient schools such as Alexandria and over time, gradually began to be formalised as a set of principles. It became very important in the Protestant tradition after the reformation driven by the debate on how to interpret the Bible. On a more Catholic note, St. Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* (On Christian Doctrine) is regarded as one of the foundational texts of hermeneutical studies and had considerable influence on Heidegger's work during his Marburg years (Moran, 2000, p. 272). Inwood (2005b) has divided the development of modern hermeneutics into three phases associated with the works of: Friedrich Schleiermacher, his biographer Wilhelm Dilthey and Martin Heidegger. Understanding *understanding* was a major theme running through Gadamer's work and he contrasted the “phenomenon of understanding (Verstehen)” with “the explanation (Erklären) characteristic of the natural sciences”(Inwood, 2005a). Paul Ricoeur described Gadamer's vision of the philosophical dialogue as a hermeneutics of trust rather than suspicion; thus rejecting the Nietzschean standpoint that “all understanding is really an attempt at mastery and will-to-power” (Moran, 2000, p. 253). In this sub-section, I have presented the

work of Hans-Georg Gadamer as a hermeneutic for the dialogue between the Erasmus-Luther debate and present-day scholarship. Now I will examine the implication of my thesis for Positivism, which is still the dominant MIS philosophy.

Implications for Positivism given its dominance as a management research paradigm

Opinions have been voiced in leading MIS journals that call for researchers to have a firm philosophical basis to justify their research strategies. Weber (2003b) contends that there is a pressing need to improve theory-building skills and in doing so researchers must “reflect deeply on and understand their ontological and epistemological assumptions” and be true to their philosophical position. In a related article, he argues that the pressure of Ph.D. students to conform to the research interests of their supervisors and organisations threatens to stifle anything which is truly novel (Weber, 2003a). Such analysis from respected commentators against the background of the so-called paradigm wars raises serious issues for those undertaking research in the area of MIS. Furthermore, the philosophical content undertaken as part of the research degree can result in a skimming of “how to” publications without any real engagement with first-hand philosophical debate. Positivism which is still the dominant philosophical paradigm in MIS, continues to have a very significant influence on the wider management discipline, and even the broader area of social science (Willis, 2008). The thesis of this paper argues that the advocates of Positivism should examine the development of their world-view in an important debate between Erasmus and Luther embedded in a very different but very extremely influential historical zeitgeist.

Suggestions for the Philosophy of Management Agenda

The debate between Erasmus and Luther was carried out primarily in the context of salvation and could be argued that it has little relevance to daily affairs at the beginning of the 21st century. However, this paper has claimed that the debate on Free Will is implicit in the influential realm of management research, which has a prominent impact on managerial discourse and practice. Consequently, it needs to be recognised and openly debated not to discredit any research paradigm but to enable growth and maturity.

Kerlin (1997) laments the introduction of the “deadly impersonal” third person to debates in philosophy and business ethics “under the influence of the social sciences”. Furthermore, he argues that the first person facilitates lively writing and avoids any “hesitation to state positions”. *Responsibility* is an important concept in the study of moral and ethical philosophy and is closely associated with the concepts of agency and free will. (M. Klein, 2005). Kerlin

(1997) took issue with Peter French on the metaphysical and practical implications of the latter's work on corporate ethics. Kerlin brings French to task for treating a Corporation as a "moral agent in its own right" since "we cannot reason with the organisation or shame it" and we are unable to attribute *responsibility* to an abstraction. He furthermore emphasizes that "our moral discourse is with the creators of the structures" (p. 1437). In relation to this, Willis (2008, p. 355) argues that there is little doubt that the "opinions, theories, biases, and beliefs of researchers have an impact on results. One way to acknowledge that is to use "I" and "we" instead of "the researcher" or "the researchers" in your papers. Another is to make your background, beliefs, theories, and biases as clear to readers as you can".

According to Fotion (2005), logical positivism is now regarded as having run its course and has little support among professional philosophers. This is a very salient point for researchers who are still overwhelmingly Positivistic in outlook and needs further reflection. Perhaps the management research community should request that at least the philosophical chapters of IS theses are written in the first person to encourage PhD students to take responsibility for presenting their personal lens and ontological commitment.

Limitations of the Study and the Reclaiming of Prejudice

Gadamer alters the normal pejorative view of *prejudice* into a positive conception that both Moran and Malpas term as the rehabilitation of prejudice. Consequently, the uncovering of our normally concealed prejudices through dialogue opens us up to new viewpoints, understandings and indeed questions. Moran (2000 p. 278) describes Gadamer as encouraging us to engage in dialogue in order to uncover our presuppositions and prejudgments. "We cannot eliminate prejudice, but we can make it visible and thus make it work for us. As Marx said, we are not able to shed our history the way a snake sheds its skin" (ibid). According to Gadamer, "prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something" (ibid).

I will respond to this and the suggestion of Willis (2008) above by declaring to be phenomenological realist as described in Costello (2017). Furthermore, my theological prejudice would be closer to Erasmus than Luther who were very different personalities and equally different in their theological outlook. However, I subscribe to the position that theology and philosophy are separate approaches that should not be confused. They can however influence each other, such as the use of philosophical reason in theological investigations and the genuine reflection by philosophers on the existence, or not, of God.

Conclusions

This paper claims that the famous debate on free will by Erasmus and Luther 500 years ago has relevance today and is antecedent to the discussion on Positivism and related philosophical positions in management research. The paper might be dismissed as a relic of a bygone age “in which the reading public devoured theological works” (Tracy, 2012 p. xxviii), and that it has little relevance in the discourse of contemporary philosophy. However, the legacy of both Erasmus and Luther is very much alive. Quinn (1999) in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* points out that the philosophy of religion is still a lively and diverse field of enquiry. This statement is also supported by the interest on topics concerning the existence, or not, of God in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Honderich, 2005 p. 341-346). This paper has attempted to invite discourse between the Christian era of Erasmus and Luther and a largely modern atheistic age, to enable fresh dialogue grounded in Gadamer’s hermeneutic of trust. Crucial to this perennial debate is the subject of agency and the conundrum of what, if any, influence someone has on their present or future actions. Willis (2008 p. 6) explains that “when using the scientific method, the purpose of research in the social sciences is to predict and control behavior. You do that through discovering universal laws of behavior that allow us, if we know the context, to predict how an organism will behave”. However I concur with Edith Stein, one of the leading lights in the development of phenomenology, writing over a hundred years ago, who contended that “mechanical causation as an explanation of physical phenomena is not appropriate for explaining *spiritual* phenomena (see note below on the original German term Geist)³” (Stein, 1989 p xxiii). Erasmus’ (2012 p. 7) conclusion that “I know that what the majority approves is not always the best” is perhaps relevant in the unfortunate contemporary polarisation between science, philosophy and religion. Failure to take up this challenge could open ourselves to what C.S. Lewis calls “chronological snobbery” (Hunt, 2015).

³ It should be noted that commentators point out that the German word “*Geist*”, as used by philosophers, is not accurately translated as “Spirit” which has a mainly religious semantic in the English language. W. Stein states that the German understanding of *Geist* is somewhere between the term Mind and Soul and its philosophical study deals with the creative human spirit.

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