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Letters to the Editor

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

*Letters should be addressed to the Editor, Graduate School of Business, 401 Uris Hall
Columbia University, New York, New York 10027.*

Dear Sir:

I wish to congratulate the editors on inviting the guest editorial from Erich Fromm printed in the August 1970 issue of *Management Science*. Fromm presents some issues that should be taken seriously by any student of management science and develops these points in a provocative and insightful way. Nevertheless, some of his points, and specifically some of the basic assumptions in his thinking, do require rejoinder. These issues should not be rejected by management scientists; neither should the response be a silent Amen.

It seems to me that the nub of the difficulty with Fromm's position is exposed by his initial rhetorical question "Is man the subject and aim of all social arrangements, including those of management?" Fromm's implied answer is yes. Unfortunately the correct answer has to be no. It is perfectly clear to any student of social behavior that men, in forming their social arrangements, commit themselves to cold, impersonal, external, and even inhuman objectives and purposes. This is the main philosophical lesson that is taught by classical and more recent studies of bureaucracy. The resulting moral dilemma is a basic problem of management.

Although the objectives of a social arrangement may be intendedly the service of some human purpose, even of an altruistic purpose, the limitations of knowledge and competence invariably produce unintended and even tragic consequences. To examine the implications of Fromm's own ideas for social design for potential ill effects would require book length treatment; but one might surmise that one could remain within the bounds of reason and not evaluate that particular utopia more highly than the present situation.

The best we can hope for from management is reasonable care in the choice of objectives and a constant reappraisal of the consequences of action as it proceeds. The real task is not to form the equation that what is good for management is good for man, but rather to exercise moral judgment continuously as to whether the desirable consequences are worth the costs incurred and whether those costs cannot be reduced.

The only "pre-established harmony" between man and management that is necessary is an employment contract. Any real contract involves costs to the persons executing it as well as benefits. Man does not enter a contract without an awareness of this fundamental fact. A contract is of necessity at least a two-party relation; and one might examine the world of music to note the extreme rarity of a harmonious composition written by two composers.

The basic value position that I have criticized above leads to certain minor errors in the balance of the editorial. It no longer makes much sense to distinguish *organic* and *mechanical* as a dichotomy. Machines have gotten progressively more complex to the point where most organic activities can be duplicated; likewise as knowledge of the organism increases (and I am referring to physiology not psychiatry) we find that parts of an organic system can indeed be changed, e.g., organ transplants.

Fromm seems to assume that *organization* and *bureaucracy* are identical terms

in current practice. This is not so. Many "social arrangements" have been developed with at least a partial disregard for the bureaucratic tradition. Many of these have turned out to be highly functional. As a central and relatively new finding of studies of organization, I would be willing to state unequivocally that the forms of organization are undergoing more rapid evolution than ever before, and that there exists now a greater diversity of basic institutional assumptions than ever before in human history. Unfortunately, sweeping generalizations such as this (as well as those of Fromm) are hard to document.

Fromm not only eschews the machine beyond what is reasonable, he also dislikes "things". It is proper to point out that the etymology of the word shows its origin in very human social arrangements (the Nordic parliaments or the latter day version: *Cosa Nostra*). Conceptually, if not emotionally, the term "thing" is synonymous with entity, and I do not think that Fromm would wish to treat humans as nonentities. Likewise, in the last paragraph on p. B702, Fromm plays on the words *human* and *inhuman* as applied to relationships. As I read this material he should be talking about *emotional relations*, about which he has much to say as a psychoanalyst. *Relation* in the abstract, as we all know, need not be emotional. Most philosophical traditions, indeed, describe man's capacity to abstract and "reify" other entities or relations as the highest pinnacle of evolutionary development that separates mankind from the "lower" animals.

As to the substance of Fromm's argument here, I would conjecture that no individual can experience a mutual emotional relationship beyond the boundaries of face-to-face groups. That a human being should have some "full" or emotional relationships would be accepted by everyone; that he must relate emotionally to his whole environment seems to me an absurdity. I would be willing to concede that one's web of emotional relationships must extend beyond the nuclear family, perhaps to some dozens of concrete other human beings. I doubt that it could extend much beyond a few hundreds of concrete other human beings.

A last and somewhat more disturbing linguistic point about Fromm's editorial must be raised. This is the repeated use of initial capitals (i.e., "Systems Man" and "Science of Man"). Is Fromm really suggesting humanistic psychology as a replacement for God?

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