Editorial

Quality sorting and social stability

The qualities of a person are constantly being evaluated by others. Institutions are seeking the top applicants and settle for the best they can get. The quality of the person who selects is reflected in the quality of the person selected.

Coping with the increasingly complex tasks of this decade requires a know-how of increasingly greater quality. The demand for persons with exceptionally high qualities of certain kinds has nearly always exceeded their supply. At the same time, the supply of people, all of whose qualities are average, greatly exceeds the demand for their services.

In the cases when persons who excel in one trait are generally also strong in all other characteristics that make up the total quality of a person (so that the individual who is weak cannot claim marketable redeeming qualities), then that small elite can substitute for one another in meeting the demand while the vast remainder go unneeded. If, on the other hand, every person were to excel in at least one activity, even if weak in all others, then there is some potentially meaningful role for everyone. The key task then would be to create such needed roles, train persons to self-actualize themselves in them and, above all, to match the resulting abilities with the needs.

The long history of investigation into whether specific abilities of a person are related has not yet yielded a definitive answer. There is probably a small fraction of people who excel in one trait and are at least average in all other important ones. There is probably a larger but still small fraction of persons whose excellence in one trait appears to be compensated by their weakness in others. There may be a large group of persons who are generally disadvantaged: from a restricted genetic pool in which weak traits are realized, they are nurtured in socially entrapped communities that prevent fullest development in which they might excel. Weakness in one

trait (e.g. susceptibility to disease) may engender weakness in other traits (stunted development, retarded education, reduced earning potential, etc.) or even contribute to creating a vicious cycle. The largests remaining part of the population probably consists of persons for whom there is no relation between the traits when they enter of move in labor force.

In a free, achievement- and consumer-oriented society, there is an implicit social contract that consumers should settle for no less than the best, and that only producers who supply the best should survive or do well. Thus, every research institute tries to be the best in its field and tries to hire only the best researchers. Rankings can be generated by peer evaluation and other means. Unless we define specialities so narrowly that there is but one institute and one person in each, some will inevitably fill the ranks below No. 1. What happens to these second, third and lower-rate persons and institutions? It is almost as inhuman for an institution that aspires to be ranked No. 1 to keep persons they consider to be of rank #n, n $\gg$ 1, as it is to fire them. And if such people join the institutions that accept the permanence of their inferior rank, this may be a stable situation only to the extent that such acceptance preserves the psychic integrity of the individuals concerned. If, for example, persons labeled as inferior are firmly convinced of a better and more just life after death, than they can accept what they consider to be inevitable and beyond their control in this life.

Fewer and fewer people are willing to accept being branded as inferior for life. As they become more educated, more urbane, more aware of their rights and more capable of enforcing their will, they are likely to agitate and militate against being so branded and treated. The mere thought of abandoning ranking and branding of persons, like ideas and things, according to their quality, will profoundly shock those whose very lives are ordered by such devices.

It is surprising how readily a group of people who can agree on nothing can reach consensus on, say, hiring only first-rate persons to fill a job opening, and

how they resist becoming very specific about the attributes of quality. Occasionally, discrimination based on quality, even if based on well-defined performance criteria for specific activities, is a disciplined form of control. Major reason why some persons want to exercise power and exert authority is that they trust no one as much as themselves in managing at a high enough quality. The tendency to take themselves too seriously in applying quality-based criteria in relating to fellow humans, has led people to engage in crusades, inquisitions, jihads, final solutions and other forms of extreme inhumanity in the guise of a superhuman perfectionist ideal.

Each individual's insecurity about his or her own worth and place under the sun, both in the sense of being minimally adequate by fixed standards and relative to the respect and esteem accorded to others, or that they have been led to expect for themselves, may be deep-rooted. Fears and anxieties resulting from such insecurities can worsen if expectations are not met or if hopes are consistently disappointed. If the existing means of controlling such potentially explosive tensions — e.g., the promise of an afterlife, of utopia following a revolution, repression, strong social pressures for the maintenance of social patterns, etc. — are weakened, and there are now signs of such a weakening, then the danger of social instability increases.

The most serious source of danger is the insidious and contradictory disguise in which this complex issue manifests itself. Quality is a sacred cow and quality-based rankings are being worshipped. It is a blasphemy even to raise the question that the quality sorting of people can lead to a disaster. Meritocrcay still seems preferable to any other form of governance. Peer review of human qualities is the fairest and the best means of selecting those who are most likely to cope with the tasks necessary for survival. The most competent are sorely needed. Were we to abandon the attainment of these needs, on the grounds that it is dehumanizing for the less competent and hence unneeded masses (except for their 'support' of those who are 'really needed'), then we may not survive. But we may not survive with our present quality-based branding methods either.

Are there any alternatives? We need to re-think human systems management and search for more creative approaches to this issue. We need a fresh approach to our search for values. How can we manage for productivity *and* self-actualization of all the people? As we develop our technologies for manufacturing, provision of services and problem-solving, that reserve for human attention only the non-routine tasks of complex and exceptional nature, as we come to depend on an increasingly advanced know-how in substituting renewable for non-renewable resources of limited supply, e.g., solar or chemically-stored forms of energy, what is the role for most of the world's people who will no longer settle for anything less than what *they* regard to be genuinely human.

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