

"Problems of Taking A Stand On The  
Social Responsibility of Engineers."

by

Frederick B. Wood, Ph.D.

---

I, Dr. F. B. Wood, am a member of the society for Social Responsibility in Science. Although I follow the code of ethics of the National Society of Professional Engineers regarding keeping proprietary information of my employer confidential, I have encountered strong business management opposition to my talking and writing about the social responsibility of engineers and scientists. I enclose a reprint of my 1959 Western Joint Computer Conference paper which caused some problems with management.

The last major crisis occurred in 1964 when Father George H. Dunne, S.J., invited me to participate in a conference on cybernetics and society. IBM personnel and public relations people tried to scare me out of participating in the conference. To have my employer interfere with my participation in a conference sponsored by a religious group made me think more deeply about what is happening to the freedom of speech, religion, and communication that our forefathers fought for in the American Revolution. Further the attempt to prevent me from participating in Father Dunne's conference was in effect a request for me to violate the code of ethics of the National Society of Professional Engineers.

It appears that in the U.S.A. we are reaching a critical point in the conflict between religious ethics and business practice similar to past crises discussed in the Harvard Business Review series in 1952 (see especially Kenneth E. Boulding, "Religious Foundations of Economic Progress.") I decided to stay in the computer industry, while pursuing the study of the ethical, social, political, and economic questions as a hobby outside of working hours at my own expense in order to be free to speak as an individual, not identified with the company for whom I work.

This decision has resulted in considerable publication and travel expense to me which normally would be paid by an engineer's employer. For example the paper I presented at the General Systems Section of the First International Congress for Social Psychiatry in London in 1964 cost me \$750 in travel expense and \$300 printing costs for the conference preprints of my paper. I issue informal reports on my studies as SocioEngineering Problems Reports with an average annual publication cost of \$880.

To carry on this struggle for the right to both work as an engineer in the computer industry and to discuss the social consequences of my work, I find it necessary to understand my own personality better. That is, I need to know something of the structure of my personality along the lines discussed by Erich Fromm in Man for Himself in order to be sure that I am proceeding on productive paths rather than being a Don Quixote. The psychotherapy my wife and I are participating in runs our annual medical bills up to a substantial figure even though a large part is covered by medical insurance.

To check whether my personal experiences are relevant to the total sociological scene, I have checked reports of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, Santa Barbara, for studies made by sociologists, political scientists, and social psychologists for studies and data bearing on the relevance of my experiences to the overall trends. I have found particularly from the studies edited by Andrew Hacker that my experiences are more acute examples of a general trend of development that is removing the upper-middle class professional people who work for corporations from effective participation in political democracy in the United States. Hacker considers that the upper middle class that used to provide leaders and an articulate segment of voters has almost been converted to "political consumers" as a byproduct of the rise to economic dominance of the large corporation in our country.

At present my study of the social consequences of my work has reached a semi-stable equilibrium by my currently only presenting papers at conferences on the history and philosophy of science which does not attract much public attention.

SOCIO-ENGINEERING PROBLEMS REPORT NO. 56-B

Date: 1/28/67 1/29/67

Stage: Letter SEPR 56-B

Frederick B. Wood, Ph.D., Box 5095, San Jose, Calif. 95150