

## **Towards an ethics perspective on the rational structure tradition of organisational communication**

### *ABSTRACT*

The rational structure tradition of organisational communication is much referenced in academic literature. The article outlines some key characteristics of this tradition. Some important theorists to have contributed to this tradition include the great sociologist, Max Weber; the great champion of scientific management, Frederick Taylor; and Luther Gulick, the champion of the division and coordination of work. The MacDonaldised organisation is used to illustrate, not to evidence, one form of organisation that has taken key aspects of the rational structure tradition to a fatal end. This article attempts to overview this tradition and thereby to contribute an ethics perspective focusing on the issue of the denial of the individual.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Communication has had an impact on organisational literature since Max Weber theorised on bureaucracy. Thus, for example, Taylor and Van Every (1993:xiv), with reference to the early Canadian technological determinist, Harold Innis, say the economic historians of the 19th century, including Max Weber, who founded the school of bureaucracy, were prompted to do so by the advent of the then new communication technologies, which improved mail delivery, the spread of the railway, introduction of the telegraph service and, towards the end of the century, telephones and the typewriter. And, while it is difficult to pinpoint the first use of the label “organisational communication”, there is general agreement that the field “organisational communication” became commonly registered as such in the 1960s (Redding, 1985: 18; Putnam & Cheney, 1990:11).

F.W. Taylor’s scientific management, Luther Gulick’s theory of departmentalisation and Weber’s theory of bureaucracy will be discussed in this article to illustrate the rational structure tradition of theorising on organisational communication.

The rational structure tradition is worthy of discussion as its underlying conceptions of organisation and of communication arguably remain very important in everyday and scientific usages. This is especially so in respect of the ideas of structure, communication and rationality that will receive attention before the article proceeds to address the work of the three theorists mentioned above. Thereafter an ethics perspective on the rational structure tradition will be briefly advanced.

### **1. STRUCTURE, COMMUNICATION AND RATIONALITY**

Formal organisational structure, according to McPhee (1985:150), has four main characteristics: First, organisational structure is explicitly stated in such a way that it can be shown to anyone, for example, using an organisational chart. Second, it is prescriptive. That is to say, it directs what should take place in an organisation by being the basis for the distribution of authority in the organisation. Third, and particularly related to the second characteristic, structure informs the activities, roles, relations and rewards associated with membership. Fourth, structure is understood to be analytically distinct from the processes or technologies of work.

Where emphasis is placed on the controlling function of organisational structure, it is held that organisational structure represents “a state of equilibrium among contending forces to power in the organisation.” (Dow referred to in J.D. Johnson, 1993:28). The underlying view of the rational structure approach is that power is instrumental in achieving organisational goals. Such power is effectuated in communicative behaviour as this reflects decisionmaking over the allocation of resources, and regarding the role of decisionmaking in the coordination of activities (Banks, 1990:276).

The formal approach to organisational structure can be discussed using what has come to be known as the container metaphor of the organisation. Here the organisation is seen in a rationalistic sense as an objective reality, an empirical object.

Analysis within the rational structure tradition follows a reductive three-step process. “First, it takes apart that which it seeks to understand. Then it attempts to explain the behaviour of the parts taken separately. Finally, it tries to aggregate understanding of the parts into an explanation of the whole.” (Gharajedaghi & Ackoff, 1984:290).

The reductive process of rational analysis is often applied within the logic of the container metaphor. Containerisation fragments the organisation from its environment, and it also fragments the organisation into parts that are understood to constitute ‘the whole’. This can be seen in what Putnam et al. (1996:379) identified as metaphor clusters which are subsumed in the idea of the organisation as container. The container metaphor also supports the canonical status of the linear models of communication which reduce communication to its ‘constituent parts’.

Simply stated, the cup metaphor upholds a containment view of the organisation as that within which action takes place. All things considered, the containment view of the organisation-communication relationship objectively pronounces the organisation to be a container within which communication occurs (albeit that the communication is stipulated as localised in conduits).

Within the organisation-as-container metaphor the dominant view of communication is that derived from the conduit metaphor (Putnam, et al. 1996:378-380). The use of the conduit metaphor in organisational communication reinforces the “container metaphor’ of the organisation by containerising communication. The power of this conduit metaphor is recognised in a 1979 semantic study by Reddy (referred to in Axley, 1982:429), which said that at least 70% of English expressions for talking about or for writing about communication carry one or more of the assumptions that underpin the conduit metaphor. These assumptions include that language transfers thoughts and feelings from person to person, that one can insert thoughts and feelings into spoken or written words, that words contain feelings and thoughts, and that listeners or readers extract thoughts or feelings from words (Axley, 1982:429). The conduit metaphor has a central role in the elaboration of communication theory. Interest in communication as transmission of information or knowledge is endemic to the social sciences. A key problem facing those who would address social epistemology relates to the provision of answers for how knowledge is transmitted from one to another, from those who know to those who do not know (cf. Adler, 1996; Chomsky, 1972).

When one speaks of the container metaphor for organisation, one assumes the existence of an environment within which the organisation is embedded. This organisation has a boundary separating it from the environment. The resultant binary nature ascribed to the environment-organisation relationship is central to reducing the organisation-communication relationship to a form amenable to the conduit metaphor.

A related rational structure view metaphorically regards organisation as a machine. This is to a great extent because in the rational structure view, organisation and communication have a containment relationship that “treats communication as located within a reified, materialistic organisational structure. Thus, the structural-functional elements of communication are critical to

the maintenance of the organisational container” (Smith in Putnam et al. 1996:375). People will often speak of how their organisation is maintained and works like a well-oiled machine. Here also the conduit metaphor of organisational communication supports this understanding of the organisation in an objectivist manner in which communication can be equated with information (cf. Daniels et al. 1997:114-130; Pace & Faules, 1994:1-25).

The formal structure approach sees communication as both flowing within organisational structure and as allocating resources and directing activities in ways that support the organisational structure. Formal organisational structure describes what ought to obtain in organisations, and in this sense it is configurational. Power is understood to be inherent in the organisational structure and it is perhaps for this reason that the idea of power, when applied within the structural functional approach, is unable to account for the use of power against the structure itself (Banks, 1990:277).

The configurational view emphasises authority in organisations and how this authority coordinates work as directed by the need to achieve specified organisational goals in a rational way (Dow referred to in J.D. Johnson, 1993:29). These concerns of the configurational view can be discussed with reference to the distinction drawn by March and Simon (1965:12) between two main lines of development of the classical structural tradition (here addressed as the rational structure tradition). The first line deals with the physical activities involved in production. The second relates to division of work and coordination at the macro-organisational level.

### ***1.1 Frederick Winslow Taylor: The physical activities of production***

One line of theorists who are often classified as belonging to the rational, classical structural approach focuses on the physical activities involved in production. Among these the most notable is perhaps Frederick Winslow Taylor.

Taylor set out to analyse the interaction of individual characteristics and the social and task environments of organisations, but in the end he “studied primarily the use of men as adjuncts to machines in the performance of routine productive tasks” (March & Simon, 1965:13). Key attention was on the use of the human body, the physical arrangement of the workplace, and the related question of tool and equipment design (March & Simon, 1965:20). The focus on physiological variables in seeking to utilise human beings permits this kind of theory to be called a physiological theory of organisation (March & Simon, 1965:13).

Taylor and his associates used time and motion studies to describe the human organism in routine production work. Here work was broken down in a rationalistic, scientific way into its smallest single tasks. The time needed to carry out each task was then measured to determine the most efficient and effective work methods, procedures and incentives to achieve desired organisational objectives as determined by management. Given that this process of management by focusing on tasks complicates even the most simple of work, it is not readily possible to carry out such studies for more complex tasks such as the decision-

making processes that comprise important aspects of the work of the stock broker or the academic. Taylor appears to acknowledge how scientific management complicates work when he uses the example of the work of carrying pig iron:

I take the cheapest labour to show you the enormous difference between putting it up to the men and our task idea. For that reason I take the handling of pig iron. That is the cheapest form of labour known. A man does not even have to use tools. The workman who handles pig iron has nothing but a pair of leather straps with a hole for his wrist, not even a glove. He reaches down, puts one hand under one end of the pig and one hand under the other, lifts it up, walks perhaps as far as across the entry, and drops it. That is all he does. There is not even a throw. It is the most elementary form of labour I know of. I am going to show you, and it will take a long time, that in handling pig iron there is an art. According to the task idea there are a lot of elements in it, that, if you put it up to that workman with his initiative, this fellow who thinks there is nothing to it, he never would and never could get there. (Taylor, 1995:11).

The tasks identified in the scientific management process are viewed against physiological variables that limit the capacity of the human being who is treated as an extension of the workplace machinery. The aim is to deny this human being the possibility of exercising any choice in the executing of the tasks given. The only choice that can be exercised by the worker is to leave the organisation. In the words of Frederick Taylor:

We do not ask our men to think. I am going to a brutal extreme. Do not misunderstand me. I must tell you rather in an extreme way what we are doing, yet I do not want it to sound brutal. I do not want you to take quite literally what I say. When I say we will not let men think, I mean we will not let them think in opposition to what we say. Our thought goes, and goes at every line in every respect. Our standards go, everything we say. The management must know more than every workman in our place, or the other scheme [of giving choice to workers] would be better. (Taylor, 1995:10).

Once the tasks involved in doing the job have been identified, Taylor's view is that it would become necessary to determine scientifically the optimum incentive to ensure workers accomplish set tasks:

To find that incentive, to find the percentage of increase necessary to pay for that, is a scientific matter that no man can decide without a series of experiments. One of the most difficult elements connected with the task idea is to determine scientifically just how much you have to pay in order to make a man do that. We made our experiments in this way. (Taylor, 1995:14).

In at least two ways Taylor displays arrogance towards workers. First, workers are seen as incapable of thinking for themselves in a way that best achieves organisational goals. Second, workers are seen as readily manipulated by means of incentives (and also through the use of punishments).

The justification for this arrogance centres on science as rational method. Recall, as Rutgers (1999:21) observes, that the etymological roots of the word “rationality” can be traced to the Greek word *logos* and to the later Roman word *ratio* from which the English word “rationality” originates. In its etymological sense *Logos* can be understood to relate to the effort to comprehend reality, through reason, calculation and weighing up of the proportions in such a manner that the ends of justice are achieved. That which is rational is, even today, not surprisingly in contention with approaches that are considered incapable of *logically* confronting reality in ways that advance the rationally-conceived ends of progress. Against the findings of a practice of science that regards itself as rational, the experiences and values of the workers are reduced to nuisance value. Recall here that, as Rutgers (1999:22-23) says, in the nineteenth century the legitimated rationality claims of science and technology came to methodologically determine what could be labelled ‘objectivity’ and ‘expertise’. The claims of the scientific paradigm of positivism were made over and against subjectivism. Directed by the methods of science, questions of values were also denied a place on the table of ‘true’ scientific knowledge. Following empiricist practices, science was said to be leading progressively and rationally towards solutions for all problems faced by humankind. Science was said to be uncovering the requisite knowledge by observation, which, of course, is ironically not, by nature, rationalistic.

In his defence, Taylor (1923:128), in the now famous *The Principles of Scientific Management*, warns that “the mechanism of management must not be mistaken for its essence, or underlying philosophy”. Taylor (1923:140) regarded scientific management as directed at the use of all available science. He presented it as opposed to rule-of-thumb approaches, as being concerned with cooperation rather than individualism; directed at the achievement of maximum as opposed to restricted output, in such a manner that each person could be rationally developed to *his greatest efficiency and prosperity*.

For Taylor, scientific management was a way to get management to share in the work of the organisation rather than leaving all affairs to workers. “There is an almost equal division of the work and responsibility between the management and the workmen. Management takes over all work for which it is better fitted than the workmen, while in the past, almost all the work and the greater part of the responsibility were thrown upon the men” (Taylor, 1923:37).

Taylor (1923) argues in two most significant ways that scientific management aims at cooperation as opposed to individualism. First, Taylor (1923; 1995) repeatedly stresses that properly introduced scientific management need not be opposed by workers, who will see the advantages of adopting it. He often uses his own experience as a point of reference, stating that in the introduction of scientific management, no strikes in opposition ever took place. Second, Taylor argues that it is too simplistic to view the fact that the worker only gets a portion of the increase in production as being a sign of exploitation, although he does grant that the worker should receive a direct benefit. In further support of this second position, he argues that it is more important to regard the “whole people” who benefit from cheaper commodity prices and a more efficient economy (cf. Taylor, 1923:138-144).

The conception of communication evinced by Taylor focuses on the employer or manager as 'communicator', and the employee as 'the communicated to'. There is very much a one-way, top-down understanding of communication that can then be inferred. The efficacy of the communicator's speech to get workers to understand and follow orders is seen as paramount. Even the use of incentives (including the monetary) and punishments can be creatively viewed here as components of management's communication arsenal. This view is characteristic of early views of communication in organisations as Putnam and Cheney (1990) can be read to say.

The reductive character of time and motion studies, as born from a fetishist application of the positivistic methods of empirical science, makes it difficult to theorise the coordination of work using Taylor's approach.

The problem of how to coordinate work is addressed in the terms of a second line of rational structure theorists, represented here by the work of Luther Gulick. Division and coordination of work are the focus of theories of departmentalisation.

### **1.2 Luther Gulick: Division of work and coordination**

Gulick's (quoted in Van Riper, 1995:7) views scientific management as referring to the rational determination of purpose and intelligent organisation in the use of labour and technology to accomplish ends. To Gulick (1965:12), decisionmaking as a theoretical concern for management science requires psychological, sociological, mathematical and economic insight and an understanding of internal and external power structures. To Gulick (1965:12), communication in administration is granted to depend "both on the invention of equipment and the appreciation of the factors involved from psychology and sociology..." Gulick's departmentalisation theory is much concerned with *the assignment problem* of how to communicate group tasks in order to do the work most efficiently and effectively within the departmental span of a manager.

Gulick speaks of human beings as being fatally flawed (cf. Gulick, 1965:6). Humans, Gulick observes, are not genetically programmed, as are other animals, to act in ways that ensure self-preservation. All hope is not denied humankind; Gulick (1965:7) argues that "the only thing which prevents mankind from early extinction is that there is something in the 46 human chromosomes which gives man what we call 'social instinct.'"

Social instinct is presented as particularly important in that it permits humans to divide and coordinate work. Gulick (1965:8) argues that social instinct leads to humans having to (1) act in individual ways that are often spoken of as expressions of 'free will'; (2) evolve "a compensating system of instruction, constraint and co-operative dependence" which is often addressed as culture; (3) create a composite and constantly evolving, yet, simplified picture of the world capable of being labelled as theory; and (4) continuously use and further develop both individual and communal technologies of memory and communication to make of the

available “physical and intellectual tools an incremental structure, the value and validity of which are constantly being tested and advanced by trial and error, trial and success”.

Gulick’s departmentalisation theory idealises the possibility of coordinated behaviour in ‘self-contained’ organisational units (March & Simon, 1965:28). To Gulick (see Meier & Bohte, 2003:63-64), the key determinants of a manager’s span of control could be understood in terms of the following three variables: (1) diversification of function, (2) time and stability, and (3) size and space. The more diverse the occupations, inputs and technologies, for example, that characterise the organisation, the smaller the spans of control can be. Over time, the more stable an organisation is, for example because there is a low turnover of staff, the greater the manager’s span of control can be. And the greater the size and space occupied by an organisation, the smaller the span of control a manager can have. Thus, Gulick acknowledges difficulties in applying the theory, particularly in large organisations such as government, where the single dominant figure of the manager does not make key decisions in terms of the purpose of the organisation and the means to achieve it. Gulick says:

These difficulties arise (1) because in government we have what is popularly known as “politics,” a system of management under which management and service are incidental interests of those in control, whose main objectives are jobs, commissions, the sale of special privileges and the maintenance of an outside vote-gathering organisation; (2) because in government we have democracy, which even under the best conditions is controlled by the many; (3) because the environment of government and the scope of operations of each unit are more complex than are those of any industry; (4) because the doctrine of state sovereignty and home rule in local affairs makes large scale production and standardisation virtually impossible in the field of government; and (5) because of the teleological enigma of government. By definition, scientific management requires the determinism in advance of the purpose to be accomplished. If you are manufacturing rails, motors, or shoes, this is not a difficult affair.... In [government with its many] fields, before action is taken, the end in view must be defined through democratic channels, not through the easy methods of dictatorship or narrow control (Gulick in Van Riper, 1995:7).

From the above it appears that departmentalisation theory appears to suggest that, in the workplace, managers should act as unquestionable dictators. It also seems to suggest that managers should be in the position to eliminate external influence.

In departmentalisation theory, it is suggested that if managers could dictate what workers accomplish and relate to work, problems of coordination would be eliminated (March & Simon, 1965:26). The following co-substantiates this observation:

Organisation... requires the establishment of a system of authority whereby the central purpose or objective of an enterprise is translated into reality through the combined efforts of many specialists... It is clear from long experience that such a structure of



authority requires not only many men at work in many places at selected times, but also a single directing executive authority (Gulick in Fitch, 1990:604).

When the confinement of the behaviour choices of workers assigned to the task requirements is presented as ideal, it can readily be said that the department thus conceived is the place of the worker who has been denied the possibility to craft an entire good and is only partly responsible for the production of the good. The human being is reduced to a tool.

If managers could eliminate external influence, they would arguably have managed to eliminate the biographically determined burden of history that managing humans implies. But human beings are just one source of external influence for organisational management. Theories of organisational complexity have shown that there are multiple external influences on organisations, such that ambiguity characterises the organisational choices of management (March & Olson, 1979).

Having initially advanced 'social instinct' as the reason for humanity's ability to divide and coordinate work, Gulick makes an about turn and suggests the need for management that acts in denial of the freedom and choice of employees. But human freedom and choice are, ironically, the basis for human sociality (Gordon, 1995:50). Gulick implicitly admits as much in saying the following:

As compared with other living forms, human chromosomes, though extremely complex, are remarkably deficient in their provision for specific behaviour patterns...

Parenthetically, let me ask you: do birds, or beavers, or ants ever build slums? The architect's drawing of their homes is written into their chromosomes (Gulick, 1965:6).

To the extent that he theorises the need to deny human sociality, Gulick's conception of communication is inadequate. As Kierkegaard (see Jansen & Steinberg, 1991:20; Van Schoor, 1980:33) noted, communication is *not merely an exercise in persuasion or manipulation, but first and foremost, a mode of existence.*

Gulick, like Taylor, relies on denial of the individual in an attempt to advance efficient and effective organisational management. Both Gulick and Taylor can be seen as attempting to operationalise and realise Max Weber's ideal bureaucracy. Weber's theory of the ideal bureaucracy is discussed here to summarise achievements of the rational structure tradition.

### **1.3 Weber: The ideal bureaucracy**

Weber's interest in organisation was (1) to identify the characteristics of the ideal bureaucracy; (2) to describe its growth and the reasons for such growth; (3) to isolate the social changes that relate to the advent and development of bureaucracies; and (4) to find the ways in which

the bureaucratic organisation of work influences the realisation of such organisations. Mainly for the fourth and last of the above-listed interests, Weber addresses rationality as it relates to “decision-making or ‘computational’ limits of individuals or alternative forms of organisation” (March & Simon, 1965:36).

Given that theorising as it struggles for legitimacy is bound up in intellectual constraints and limitations, material possibilities and limitations of a given era (Reed, 1996:33), the metaphors employed to illustrate a given theory are also chosen in respect of the dynamics of the historical period within which the theory is founded. This argument should also hold for Max Weber’s conception of the ideal bureaucracy in terms of the metaphor of the dominant means of production of his era, the machine: In the Weberian ideal bureaucracy, the individual is conceived as a mere component that acts as an extension of the organisational machine in its quest to achieve externally-set goals.

Briefly, and with historical reference, to introduce the idea of the machine metaphor of the organisation, it appears reasonable to refer to Marshall McLuhan who followed the path of Harold Innis in creatively identifying the impact of communication as informing the form of society. McLuhan presents a genealogy of media effects according to which progress has occurred through the oral, phonetic, print, and electronic ages. According to McLuhan (1960:570-572), the invention by Gutenberg of the printing press had an enormous impact on the organisation and its management. The organisation fostered by Gutenberg’s technological advance is highly functionally organised, and it discouraged individuality as workers were made to conform to the demands of assembly-line production. The Gutenberg organisation was highly segmented, and clear lines of production and authority could be discerned.

What McLuhan identified as the Gutenberg organisation is reflective of Max Weber’s ideal bureaucracy, which can be summarised as calling for:

1. Equal treatment of all employees
2. Reliance on expertise, skills, and experience relevant to the position
3. No extraorganisational prerogatives of the position...; that is, the position is seen as belonging to the organisation, not the person. The employee cannot use it for personal ends
4. Specific standards of work and output
5. Extensive record keeping dealing with the work and output
6. Establishment and enforcement of rules and regulations serving the interests of the organisation
7. Recognition that rules and regulations bind managers as well as employees; thus employees can hold management to the terms of the employment contract (Perrow, 1986:3).

The situation of those in the organisation is defined by the presence of those higher up in the hierarchy. These holders of higher positions in the hierarchy have legitimate authority

that orientates conduct towards certain recognisable and desired axioms. Within such an organisation, regulations are such that social relations are either closed to outsiders or restrictions exist to the admission of these outsiders, and the authority to enforce these regulations is vested in managers charged with this function (Weber, 1962:107).

The authority vested in these managers has validity only to the extent that it is enforceable in such a way that it can rationally be said to be worth imitating. This is to say that managerial authority must be able to appeal to more than simply expediency, but also to a custom that is considered legitimate (Weber, 1962:72). The value attached to legitimacy of authority in Weber's work also means that the organisation is conceived as needing legitimacy from the environment to act. The Weberian ideal organisation achieves this legitimacy by citing its credentials to produce goods desired for the survival of the organisation.

From the achievement of authority to the acquisition of legitimacy, the Weberian concept of organisation can be summed up as one in which "members use the ideal type conception of bureaucracy to understand the conduct of other members and to guide their own actions; because they all act in patterns organised by the ideal type, their actions coordinate in such a way that organisations consequentially and meaningfully exist" (McPhee & Zaug, 2000).

For Weber (1962:115) the corporate group achieves "an aggregative social relationship" within which the individual, as such, ceases to matter. This idea of the equal treatment of workers in bureaucratic organisations has been brought to a fatal end by a process well illustrated by the fast food-chain, McDonalds.

Ritzer (1988) asserts that 'McDonaldisation' aims to make all workers the same or to remove the changes in productivity that individuals could yield to the output. The great revolution of the McDonaldisation process is then the ability effectively to deny the franchise owner (effectively a new type of employee), workers and even customers (again these are read as a new type of worker) the possibility of experiencing difference. Franchise owners, employees and customers can all be seen as employees of the shareholders of McDonald's, as their positions are far removed from their personal prerogatives. Regarding these classes of individuals as employees is an observation of the form made by Chester I. Barnard in noting, for example, that the actions which evidence "organisation forces include all actions of contribution and receipt of energies, so that a customer making a purchase, a supplier furnishing supplies, an investor furnishing capital, are all contributors" (Barnard, 1968:77). McGeehan (2005) however observes that "the notion that the majority of shareholders should rule is treated as a quaint one, at best, in most American boardrooms." One can assume that the status of shareholders in American boardrooms is not much different from international trends.

The entire McDonald's experience is bound up in a language that prioritises specific standards of work and output. The implementation and the realisation of the McDonaldisation process are achieved through rules and regulations that govern the (franchise) owner, the managers and the employees. Extensive record keeping in the 'McDonaldised' organisation permits

the certainty of prediction and control for the achievement and enforcement of organisational objectives. The customer too is regulated through mechanisms of the market whose rules of the unavailability of time and laws of supply and demand ensure that McDonald's products are bought.

If one judges by the phenomenal growth of the franchise, one could speak of the coincidence of the various conditions of the marketplace and the processes employed by McDonald's as being the basis for the legitimacy McDonald's seems to enjoy. It can then be said, using Habermas's (1973:2) conception of the conditions for a legitimisation crisis, that the McDonald's organisational structure is able to satisfy the on-demand character of food requirements that society currently presents, yet the McDonald's organisation fatally fails to address the social needs of the individual.

Underlying the idea of the bureaucratic organisation of the workplace, which is taken to a fatal end in the McDonaldised organisation, is a particular notion of rationality which focusing on the use of action in the achievement of particular goals. Here rationalism relates to the thinking that underlies intentional action, which demands the ability to analyse reality in a logical, hence reliable manner.

The rational goal of the bureaucratic organisation and thus also of the McDonaldised organisation is summarised by the 'three Es': economy, efficiency and effectiveness (Rutgers, 1999:32). The key belief here is that "Organisations are constructed to be the most effective and efficient social units. The actual effectiveness of a specific organisation is determined by the degree to which it realises its goals. The efficiency of an organisation is measured by the amount of resources used to produce a unit of output. Output is usually closely related but not identical to the organisational goals" (Etzioni, 1964:8). The question of effectiveness asks whether the organisation is fit-for-purpose, this is also to say that it requires social control over individuals in order to permit organisational goal attainment. In this conception, it is not possible to countenance internal contradictions as anything that is contradictory in organisational function or regarded as lacking in rationality (Rutgers, 1999:26-27).

All effort is made to deny the individual human agent, as he or she is a possible source of contradiction. Zygmunt Bauman (2000) has noted that the mechanical bureaucracy then achieves the terrible potential to blunt the sensibilities of individuals to such an extent that atrocities such as the Holocaust can be claimed by individual workers to have been beyond their awareness or responsibility. The rationalistic conception of the organisation of society can be said to marginalise the individual, making him or her subservient to a mechanistically conceived environment:

Man, his groups, and their interrelations thus constituted an unbroken continuity with the rest of the mechanistically interpreted universe. All were based on the interplay of natural causes, to be studied as systems of relationships that could be measured and expressed in terms of laws of social mechanics (Buckley, 1967:8).

It could, however, be argued that Weber does identify the individual when showing an interest in the relationship between “an official and his office” (March & Simon, 1965:36). This relationship is an important one in early theories of leadership which, for example, identified the leader as the uniquely rational decisionmaker who keeps the organisation directed towards its goals. However, for example, identification of the leader does not amount to recognising him or her as an individual. In general, Weber focuses on the bureaucratic organisation as a machine to achieve specified ends in an efficient and effective manner “and he is not exceptionally attentive to the human organism” (March & Simon, 1965:37). The Weberian interest in ‘the individual and his office’ was mainly about how communication and the authority of this communication are determined by the position, not by individual characteristics.

From the above discussion of the work of Frederick Winslow Taylor, Luther Gulick and Max Weber, the view can be expressed that the rational structure tradition appears to fail to address the individual in organisations in a manner which can be ethically condoned.

## **2. AN ETHICS PERSPECTIVE**

This brief section will attempt to highlight and express the failure of the rational structure approach to address the individual, and the choice of possibilities that characterise human beings. Given the ethics perspective of this article, which raises the issue of the denial of the individual, these inadequacies or failures deserve a mention.

McPhee (1985:150) regards formal structure as that which can be shown to anyone. It is prescriptive, informs the activities, roles, relations, and rewards associated with membership and it is analytically distinct from the processes or technologies of work. Rational structure, as established context, becomes the basis for the emergence of a form of ethics that can be described as largely utilitarian.

Sen (1999:58) says that classical utilitarianism can be said to have the following three main forms of expression:

1. Consequentialism: as related to the demand that actions be evaluated only on the basis of the managerially defined goodness of their consequences to the exclusion of all other considerations (cf. Sen, 1988:75).
2. Welfarism: as related to restricting the evaluation of utilities to the state of affairs in a given state in time and space.
3. Sum ranking: as related to the aggregate of utilities. According to this expression of classical utilitarianism, social utility is the sum or the arithmetic mean of utilities of all people in a society at a given time (cf. Harsanyi, 1982:40).

The rest of this brief section addresses these three expressions of utilitarianism from an existential approach to ethics that critically regards classical utilitarianism as positing an organisational practice drained of the human element in decision-making processes. Organisational practice is

seen to be presented as imbued with Godly omniscience. In this posited rational practice, those theorised to be subject to the decisionmaking of management in organisations are reduced to objects for manipulation. The decisionmaker is constructed as sadist and the decided-for are reduced to masochists in this misanthropic conception that thus denies the human being in the capacity of an individual.

Classical utilitarian ethics, with their consequentialist emphasis on ends not means, discount the processes that lead up to the gaining of the utility. This thought is implicit in the views of Menestrel *et al.* (2002) who offer a decision theory of ethics, which suggests seeing ethical dilemmas as falling on a continuum characterised by choices between processes and consequences. The focus of Menestrel and associates appears to be informed by the relative and certainly not absolute shift in theoretical emphasis from structure to process which occurred with the Hawthorn studies. These studies are generally, if uncritically, accepted to have shown that there is possible satisfaction and motivation in the process of work, not just in rewards or punishments that accrue as consequences. See, for example, a withering and insightful critique of the Hawthorne studies by Carey (1997; 2000). The insistence on welfare, diminished to mere satisfaction enjoyed as a consequence in the here and now, is a denial that the process can itself be a utility.

The manager can still point to the legitimacy gained from society to suggest that the organisation offers a social utility; the aggregate utility legitimates the organisation. Detrimental impacts, e.g. in the local community and of the environment, resultant from organisational function are ruled unimportant by the achievements of such sum ranking of utility.

Not all information can be weighed in the manager's utilitarian evaluation of ethics (cf. Sen, 1999:56). This is so, given that when the utilitarian accepts utility as a good, or as happiness, or pleasure, or satisfaction, this utility can only be accessed through the intervention of a subjective experience. All the individual subjective experiences needed to evaluate whether or not a particular 'utility' is a social good cannot be accessed by the utilitarian evaluator of ethics, who, if one agrees with Adam Smith (referred to in Harsanyi, 1982:39), must occupy the role of an impartial, sympathetic observer. The 'utility' identified by the utilitarian evaluator of ethics can therefore only be the impossible objective aggregate of the subjective utilities observed.

In utilitarianism's classical form, as developed particularly by Jeremy Bentham, utility is defined as pleasure, or happiness, or satisfaction, and everything thus turns on these mental achievements. Such potentially momentous matters, as individual freedom, the fulfilment or violation of recognised rights, aspects of quality of life not adequately reflected in the statistics of pleasure cannot directly swing a normative evaluation in this utilitarian structure. They can have a direct role only *through* their effects on utility numbers (that is, only to the extent that they may have an impact on mental satisfaction, pleasure or happiness). Furthermore, the aggregative framework of utilitarianism has no interest in – or sensitivity to – the actual distribution of utilities, since the concentration is entirely on the *total* distribution of utilities, since the concentration is entirely on the *total* utility of everyone taken together.

All this produces a significant limited informational base, and this pervasive insensitivity is a significant limitation of utilitarian ethics (Sen, 1999:56).

When the manager argues that the organisation serves not individuals but society, this identifies two major advantages of the utilitarian approach, as identified also by Sen (1999:60): First, utilitarianism takes into consideration the consequences or the results of social arrangements, even if these are limited to welfarism's emphasis on the specific time and place. Second, utilitarianism takes into consideration the well-being of the people, even if the manner in which this well-being is then assessed through the idea that social utility may be reproachable.

But the claim that the organisation benefits society may perhaps demand acceptance that there is an organisation and environment that are distinct and that an objective relationship can be identified between them. When the organisation is revealed as a myth, as is the observation of contemporary theorists such as Karl Weick and J.R. Taylor – who identify organisations as existent through emergent patterns of interaction, i.e. through communication, – this claim cannot stand up to logical scrutiny. When the individuals who constitute organisation through their communicative interaction begin to be recognised, the legitimacy claim of the rational structure organisation is undermined, as at least two possibilities emerge to evaluate utility according to what would benefit the largest number of people, or according to the aggregate of the quality of good and bad subjective experiences. As Deetz (1992; 1995) illustrates, all stakeholder interests, not just the managerial, can and should define the ethical.

When the individual is recognised, the utilitarian approach can then begin to be critiqued in terms of its “neglect of rights, freedoms and other non-utility concerns” (Sen, 1999:62). The utilitarian approach sidelines human rights by making them subject to the achievement of specified ends. Thus, freedom of speech, for example is said to be only desirable if it does not have a negative impact upon the utilities that society may attain. Freedom is a concept that relates to “both the *processes* that allow freedom of actions and decisions, and the actual *opportunities* that people have, given their personal and social circumstances” (Sen, 1999:17).

The fact that individuals find themselves in organisational circumstances has an impact on the opportunities individuals have to exercise choices. Thus, the fact that individual freedom is deliberately limited in the rational structure tradition is a cause for concern. But in the utilitarian vein, everything that does not serve to increase utility is dismissed as being without value because it limits the freedom of the individual. In all of the above criticisms of the utilitarian approach, the fundamental issue has been that this approach does not accord sufficient value to the individual and to the freedom that dignifies human existence.

The question arises as to whether or not the individual and the freedom of the individual have any value. If one agrees with Sen (1999), the extent of achievement of freedom (for the individuals who constitute a society) defines development (which is a measure of the extent to which a society has moved towards the ultimate good). In Sen's (1999:18) view, freedom has an evaluative and an effectiveness role. In the former, the fact that individuals have freedom enables them to choose

that value to ascribe to utilities. Theorists of utilitarianism, as Hammond (1982:87) observes, find choice to be problematic in their efforts to determine the sum and the spread of social utilities. This only supports the value of acknowledging the freedom of individuals and the societies they comprise. The latter role regards the idea that human agency, the basis for human effectiveness, can only be conceptualised with acknowledgement of the freedom of the individual (cf. Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). In the words of Sen:

“...freedom is not only the basis of the evaluation of success and failure, but also a principal determinant of individual initiative and social effectiveness. Greater freedom enhances the ability of people to help themselves and also to influence the world, and these matters are central to the process of development. The concern here relates to what we may call (at the risk of some over-simplification) the “agency aspect” of the individual” (Sen, 1999:18).

The purpose of the so-called rational structures enacted in some organisational contexts, and acted out in others, needs to be questioned. Because they are based, in great measure, on ‘normal’ conceptions that have been passed on through the generations, at least from the time of the Industrial Revolution, they seem unquestionable, save by the heretic.

The theorist of the rational structure tradition seemingly does not question the ideals of the fathers of the tradition, such as Max Weber, Frederick Winslow Taylor and Luther Gulick. Yet, the theorist of this tradition maintains that the work he or she is doing is original and of great value (which it doubtless is). The theorist of structure can repeat the ideals of the founders of the tradition, whether or not they contradict available evidence. This theorist repeats the emphasis on rationality and on structure. The poetic words of Robert Frost’s (1995) *Mending Wall* express this as they speak very well of an unquestioning neighbour’s belief in good fences. Of the neighbour it is said:

He only says, ‘Good fences make good neighbours.’  
 Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder  
 If I could put the notion in his head:  
 “*Why* do they make good neighbours? Isn’t it  
 Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.  
 Before I built a wall I’d ask to know  
 What was I walling in and walling out,  
 And to whom I was like to give offence,  
 Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,  
 That wants it down.” I would say, ‘Elves’ to him,  
 But it’s not elves exactly, and I’d rather  
 He said it for himself. I see him there,  
 Bringing a stone grasped firmly from the top  
 In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.  
 He moves in darkness, as it seems to me,  
 Not of woods only and the shade of trees,  
 He will not go behind his father’s sayings



And he likes having thought of it so well  
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbours."

The irony is that the two main justifications for 'rational structures', as for "good fences" are, firstly, that they enhance efficiency and effectiveness and, secondly, that they make for ethical relations in which all can benefit. That this much evidence contradicts these justifications is ignored. The poetic words of Robert Frost (1995) express this unfortunate contradiction very well:

Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,  
One on a side. It comes to little more:  
There where it is we do not need the wall:  
He is all pine and I am apple orchard  
My apple trees will never get across  
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.  
He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbours.'

Something there is that does not love structures. And it would seem that this 'thing' spoken of is the freedom of the individual, which demands opportunities and expresses possibilities. Something there is that does not love rationality. That 'thing' would include the lack of information about all things that make absolute rationality impossible. It would also include the individual who ironically is able to reconcile the contradictory. The agentic individual is able, for example, to interpret limiting and constraining structures into infinite possibilities through choice and freedom; for, as Kierkegaard shows, human existence and human actions are comprehensible only in terms of the possibility of possibility (Stacks, 1977:45).

### **3. CONCLUSION**

In this article, the rational structure tradition was discussed. Three main theorists, Taylor, Gulick, and Weber were drawn upon to illustrate this tradition. Informed by existential concerns, an ethics perspective observed inadequacy or failure to address the individual from within the rational structure tradition.

The discussion identified how communication is conceived of as contained in the objectified organisational structure. In the rational structure view of organisation, communication is limited to a utilitarian ends-means conception that misconstrues communication as the transfer of information. Fairhurst and Putnam can be read to summarise the views of the rational structure tradition:

Early conceptions of organisational communication assumed a narrow, if not distorted, view of communication's relationship to organising. Organisational communication was little more than a mechanical transmission, the reflection of structure, the discharge of psychological concepts like scripting, or interpersonal communication with air conditioning. The organisational context was not a difference that made a difference in social interaction, and communication was not central to organising (Fairhurst & Putnam, 1999:1).

The ethical perspective criticised the utilitarian rational structure approach mainly on the grounds that denial of the individual who acts in freedom is denial of the basis for both evaluation and effectiveness of action, since both are based on the individual as agent.

The value of a literature review, such as this, is that it assists in taking stock of an idea. The critical literature review goes further by locating the presentation of the literature in an argument that relates to the limits and possibilities of human being in the world. In so doing the critical literature review offers questions and challenges regarding how people should live, and organise. In this respect the critical literature review may succeed in speaking words on ethics that are truly worthwhile for those who would be thinkers of the humanities.

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