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To Err is Human; To Really Foul Things Up Requires a Computer

- **quoteresearch < https://quoteinvestigator.com/author/garson/>**
- **December 7, 2010 < https://quoteinvestigator.com/2010/12/07/foul-computer/>**

Paul Ehrlich? Alexander Pope? Senator Soaper? Bill Vaughan? Agatha Christie? Anonymous?

Dear Quote Investigator: I am reading your blog and that shows I am not a Luddite, but computers can be very exasperating. One of my favorite quotations on this topic is the following:

> To err is human, but to really foul things up you need a computer.

When I tried to find out who said this originally I came across the name of biologist Paul Ehrlich. He wrote an influential and controversial book "The Population Bomb" in 1968. But I cannot figure out where or when Ehrlich said this quotation. Would you delve into this and determine the specifics? I suspect that it is another anonymously authored witty remark.

Quote Investigator: The popularity of this funny maxim is indicated by its appearance in the Oxford Dictionary of Quotations,[1] the Yale Book of Quotations,[2] and the Columbia Dictionary of Quotations.[3] In each of these three references the adage is presented as anonymous. The Yale Book of Quotations gives the earliest cite dated October 3, 1969.

Paul Ehrlich is credited with the quote in some places, e.g., in a listing of "101 Great Computer Programming Quotes".[4] But the earliest examples of the phrase attributed to Ehrlich were published many years after the words originally appeared in print.

In 1969 a thematically similar remark appeared in the book "Hallowe'en Party" by the famous mystery writer Agatha Christie:[5]

> I know there's a proverb which says, 'To err is human' but a human error is nothing to what a computer can do if it tries."

A separate article about the Christie quotation is available **here < https://quoteinvestigator.com/2017/05/26/computer-error/>** .

The first close match located by **QI** appeared on April 2, 1969 and was credited to a comical personage named 'Senator Soaper' who was the fictional alter ego of the newspaper columnist Bill Vaughan. The words initially appeared under that name in a Virginia paper:[6]

> To err is human, to really foul things up requires a computer.

Current evidence suggests that William E. Vaughan crafted this phrase although it is possible he was influenced by the Agatha Christie passage.

This computer-era dictum is a twist on the epigram of the famous 18th century English literary figure Alexander Pope: To Err is Human; to Forgive, Divine. But Pope's actual words published in "An Essay On Criticism" in 1711 were slightly different since the preferred spelling of "human" has changed: [7]

> Good-Nature and Good-Sense must ever join; To Err is Humane; to Forgive, Divine.

Interestingly, a later edition of "An Essay On Criticism" stated on its title page that Pope originally wrote the work in 1709.[8]

In 1962 Time magazine ran a profile titled "Star Paragrapher" about William Edward 'Bill' Vaughan a syndicated columnist based at the Kansas City Star. Vaughan specialized in composing pithy passages called "paragraphs" that were one or two sentences in length and were wise or funny. Here are two samples from the article:[9]

> "The painter of abstract art is well advised to price his works at some figure, such as 66 dollars, which increases in value when hung upside down."
>
> "I am not an extreme rightist," Walter Tippy shouted at a late-evening political discussion. "But I am extremely right."

The article pointed out that some of Vaughan's remarks were widely propagated without credit to the author. Vaughan composed many original sayings, but he noted that the paragraph writing format was rife with uncredited borrowings[10]

> Like all good paragraphers, Bill Vaughan takes a whimsical view of his craft. "Paragraphing was always based on a firm foundation of mutual plagiarism," he says. "It may be that paragraphs are hard to sell because editors are accustomed to swiping them."

The syndicated column "Senator Soaper Says" was written by multiple authors over the decades. Vaughan took over responsibility for the feature from Harry V. Wade in 1953. On April 2, 1969 the maxim under investigation appeared as a free standing quote under the name of the imaginary legislator:[11]

> Senator Soaper
>
> To err is human; to really foul things up requires a computer.

A few days later on April 6th the maxim appeared as the lead item in the "Senator Soaper Says:" column with Vaughan's byline, e.g., in the Independent Press-Telegram of Long Beach, California.[12] The next day, April 7th, the words appeared as a free standing quote with no identification given in the Hartford Courant. Other anonymous instances occurred in 1969 such as a report in August that the saying with slightly different wording was seen as an item of graffiti:[13]

> GRAFFITO observed: "To err is human. To really foul up takes a computer.

In 1970 the opera singer, speech instructor, and pioneering self-help writer Dorothy Sarnoff included the statement in one of her books.[14] The appendix contained a collection of categorized punchlines and under "Computer" she presented the words together with an attribution[15]:

> To err is human; to really foul things up requires a computer.
>
> — BILL VAUGHAN

In 1980 a Washington Post article discussed the animus towards computers and stated that a plaque was available for purchase with the aphorism:[16]

> For a few dollars you can buy a plaque that reads 'To err is human — to really foul things up requires a computer,' or 'Data Processing Department — information made complicated while you wait.'

The first time that the quotation was associated with the scientist Paul Ehrlich apparently occurred in the 1980s. The Google Books archive contains an Australian periodical with the following:[17]

> I recall Paul Ehrlich saying: "To err is human but to really foul things up you need a computer."

The date is circa 1986 but **QI** has not verified this information with a paper copy or digital scans, hence the date may be inaccurate.

In 1992 the quote appeared in multiple newspapers with Ehrlich's name attached:[18]

> Thought for Today: "To err is human but to really foul things up requires a computer." —Paul Ehrlich , American scientist (1926-).

In conclusion, the first instances of the quotation known to **QI** appeared in 1969. A close match was penned by the columnist Bill Vaughan, and **QI** believes he should receive credit for now. An Agatha Christie novel contains a similar statement as discussed **here < https://quoteinvestigator.com/2017/05/26/computer-error/>** . Paul Ehrlich may have said it also, but **QI** has not located any comparable early cites. **QI** thanks you for your question, and hopes that your experiences with computers belie the aphorism.

Image Notes: Cartoon illustrating a computer problem from OpenClipart-Vectors at Pixabay.

(Thanks to Dejan Ristanovic whose message led QI to add pertinent information about the Agatha Christie quotation which had previously been analyzed in a separate article on the website. Special thanks to Ian Ellis of "Today in Science History" at todayinsci.com who told QI about the edition of Pope's "An Essay On Criticism" listing a 1709 date.)

Update History: On June 2, 2018 this article was crosslinked to the article about the Agatha Christie quotation. The bibliographic format was changed to a numeric style. On February 1, 2018 the citation specifying a 1709 date for Pope's essay was added.

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