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## Man's Needs Interview with Huston Smith

Erich Fromm  
(1960g-e)

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Smith: We have been talking about the freedom of man. Man is the only creature for whom the real is fringed by the possible. Tonight we turn to the nature of man.

Who is this creature who sits aside this freedom? The most obvious thing we can agree upon is that he is an ambiguous animal. We have seen vivid evidence of this in our own time. On the one hand, he has a tremendous capacity to reach out in concern for other persons. But, at the same time, we have seen in our own day a savagery, a capacity for violence and destruction, in man which has perhaps been unequalled in all history. Who then is this creature who has these extremes latent within him? What is the nature of man?

We need help at this point from those who have taken man as the focus of their study. We have with us one of the leading psychiatrists in the world today, Dr. Erich Fromm; also, I suspect, the psychiatrist whose writings have been read by more people in our generation than those of perhaps any other psychiatrist. He is widely known for his books, *Escape from Freedom. Man for Himself, Psychoanalysis and Religion, The Sane Society*, and now his latest one, *The Art of Loving*.

Doctor Fromm, it is a joy to have you with us. Let me ask you what psychiatry has found out about man. Can I expect your answers to be scientific answers?

Fromm: It all depends on what we call scientific. If psychiatry and psychoanalysis and psychology is a science, it is a very young science which can really not compare itself with physics at the present day. It is a science which probably has still to devise its own methods. As soon as we deal with something which is alive and which we want to observe as alive, it would change its quality to force it on the laboratory table and heat it as if it were a thing. I think psychology is indeed scientific, inasmuch as there are psychologists who have a scientific attitude, who want to observe things objectively, who want to see things as they are rather than to see them as they wish them to be, or not to see them if they are afraid for them to be in a certain way.

Smith: Are the discoveries that psychiatry is making about the nature of man and his needs new discoveries?



Fromm: Paradoxically enough, they are terribly old. As I see man and his nature, I think the discoveries which we can make scientifically or psychologically today really amount to the same discoveries and to the establishment of the same norms which have been established by the great teachers of the human race two, three, or four thousand years ago, the great norms of humanism which were postulated in diverse parts of the earth.

Smith: A remarkable consistency among the men of insight, now detailed through scientific evidence.

Fromm: Yes.

Smith: Turning now to the nature of man and his needs, what do you see the needs of man as being?

Fromm: I should like to make first a kind of negative statement, because even today, as in the 19th century, many people think that the main needs of man are either of a material nature such as food, or as Freud and so many of his followers have postulated, of an instinctual need and nature such as the sexual needs. It is perfectly due that man could not live if he did not eat and drink and sleep. Actually, nobody has ever died from non-satisfaction of sexual needs, but those are important needs, too. But even if all the instinctive and material needs of man were fulfilled, this would not be a condition for happiness or even for sanity because man is a very unique organism, with needs which spring from the very uniqueness and peculiarity of his human existence.

Smith: What do you conceive these human needs to be? What do you think psychiatry is showing to be the specifically human needs which must be satisfied if man is to reach his full development?

Fromm: I should rather not speak in the name of psychiatry, because my views are perhaps not quite orthodox enough, so I speak for myself.

In the first place, I think these needs are to be understood from the specific condition of human existence. Man is a paradox. He is within nature and he transcends nature. He is, you might say, the only organism where life has become aware of itself. Man is gifted with imagination, with reason, with awareness of his existence, of his death, and of all the many choices he has. Therefore, he has a singular and unique problem to solve. His needs are unique and specifically human inasmuch as they are rooted in this peculiarity and in this specificity of his human condition.

To be a little bit more specific, I would say the first human need is that of relatedness. Man is torn away from nature. You might say he is torn away from the primitive harmony which the animal has in its relatedness to nature. He is aware of himself. He needs to relate himself to others, to the world, in some way. If he cannot relate himself in some way, he is insane. Indeed, insanity is to be defined as that condition of man in which he has lost the capacity to relate himself. But he can relate himself in many ways. He can relate himself by submitting to an outside power and feeling himself part and parcel of it. He can relate himself by wishing to have power over somebody who is



weaker and in that way to feel enriched, so to speak, by the weaker person. Or he can relate himself by love, by the feeling of being one with another person under the condition of being two, of retaining his integrity. I would say this is the only form of relatedness which corresponds to man's nature, to his dilemma of needing to be himself and needing to be one with others.

Smith: He needs to be related to others. There can be wrong ways of relatedness. Submission or domination are examples of such wrong ways, and love would be the example of the right way.

Fromm: Yes. Just as one needs to eat in order not to die, one needs to be related. That holds true from the satisfaction of the other needs I am talking about in order not to be insane. But the way in which one fulfills these needs makes the difference not between insanity and not insanity, but between better and worse, between happiness and unhappiness, between mental health and mental illness. Insanity, mentally speaking, would be the equivalent of death, physically speaking.

Smith: Insofar then as a person does relate himself to others by submitting himself to them or by dominating them, to this extent he would deviate from mental health.

Fromm: Yes, exactly.

Smith: What needs are there other than relatedness?

Fromm: I would say the second need is that of rootedness. By this I am again referring to the basic human condition; namely, that the child is rooted in the mother's womb, and the act of birth is the emergence from that womb. Man as a race is rooted originally in nature, in the soil, in the ties of blood, and his development is an emergence from these natural roots. As long as the child is the fetus in the womb, or the babe on the breast of mother, or the infant led by her hands, it is secure. And as long as man was rooted in the ties of blood, he was in a way secure too. He had less problems, but he was also undeveloped. In order to develop, he has to be fully born; he has to separate himself from these original roots. But he can do so only if he finds new roots, if he finds a new home. I believe the only human way of solving this problem is if he arrives at the feeling of brotherly love, at the feeling of solidarity with his fellow man, if he succeeds to make this world a truly human home, rather than to fall into the trap of regressing into new ties of idolatry, of blood and soil and race.

Smith: Is a matter of geographic extent involved here? If a person were related in brotherly love to his family, that would be too small a group and this would be a wrong-rootedness?

Fromm: Indeed, I would say that unless one can love all men, one loves nobody; because if one is only loving one's family, it is really an enlarged egotism.

Smith: The difference then between rootedness and relatedness is that relatedness speaks



to the manner of relationship and rootedness calls for breadth and scope.

Fromm: That is perfectly true.

Smith: Are there other needs?

Fromm: A third need is that which you might call transcendence. By this I mean something very special and concrete. Man is a creature. He is thrown into this world without his will and consent, and he goes away from this world without his will and consent, usually quite accidentally. But, having an awareness of himself, he is not satisfied with the role of dice thrown out of a cup, with the role of a creature who is just an object. He has a profound need to transcend his role as a creature, to transcend life.

He can do that in two ways. He can do it by being a creator--a creator by creating children, by creating ideas, by creating things. All this is fulfilled in the realm of art, of science, of all the many cultural activities which man has now. Creating has, however, certain premises. It needs effort, it needs love, it needs concentration. Many people are inhibited from creating. Then something paradoxical happens. I can transcend life also by destroying it. If I cannot create, the need for transcendence is transformed into a need for destruction. Indeed, I think we see the very example you mentioned at the beginning today, that the need for destruction becomes terribly strong and intense if the need for creation is not satisfied. {12}

Smith: Then destruction really would be the result of un-lived life, you might say?

Fromm: Exactly. I would say that.

Smith: It really is this need to be more than a passive particle, to be an agent, and to have one's life count and make a difference in some way. If it doesn't--if you can't make it count in a creative, positive way--then you will have a need to have it make a difference in a destructive way. Would that be right?

Fromm: Yes, indeed. And I think this is our greatest problem. If we cannot bring about a world in which the person can be creative--and by that I don't mean that he is an artist, but that he is creative in some manner--then indeed there is nothing left but that men become destructive.

Smith: Are there other needs?

Fromm: There are two other needs that I want to mention. One is the need to have a sense of identity. Again, the sense of identity is related to the basic human situation. Inasmuch as man's life is not determined by instincts, inasmuch as he is not an animal, inasmuch as he is separate, inasmuch--to use the Biblical example--as he is driven out from Paradise, he is aware of himself as he, and he must be able to have a sense of identity; that is, to say the word "I" meaningfully. But this sense of identity depends a great deal on the social situation. In the primitive tribe where individualism is not yet developed, the person's sense of identity might be expressed in the formula "I am we." In the last



four hundred years we have overcome the sense of communal existence that was felt even in the medieval culture. It is not incidental that Descartes had as his main question, "Who am I? How do I know that I am I?" The "I" became a question in the modern era, in the last four hundred years.

Again, there are two ways of satisfying this quest for a sense of identity. The positive way is that I can really legitimately say "I"--"I think, I feel," by which I mean my thought and my feeling originate in myself. It is genuinely my activity. If people fail in doing this, then indeed their sense of identity is fulfilled in another manner, namely by conformity. Then they feel, "I am I, inasmuch as I am not different from anybody else," and then they are frightened to death of being different. I am afraid that is one of the great troubles of our day, not that people are so much forced to conform as that they are afraid of not conforming, because they need to have a sense of identity. In many instances they have only this pseudo sense of identity by conformity, rather than to be able really to say "I." It is a strange experiment if, instead of asking "How are *you?*," *you* ask somebody "Who are you?" The reaction is sometimes quite startling.

Smith: It really is a confusion then between feeling, confusing the need for relatedness with the need for uniformity. You would say these are very different things.

Fromm: Exactly. Perhaps I could add here that I think we have misunderstood a great deal the concept of equality. We mean today very often by equality sameness, as if we had a right to be equals, as if we had a right for freedom and independence only if we were not different. I would say, in the tradition of Kant, that real equality means that each person is an end in himself and must never be a means to anybody else, under the condition that we are different and not that we are the same.

Smith: In the matter of identity, as I understand it, it is this sense of being the agent of my thoughts, my deeds, that is very important. Would this relate to an equal value which has often been proposed, when we have a loss of ourselves, transcend ourselves as in moments of ecstatic seizure, *when we* are lifted out and lose all sense of our self and our separateness? Are these bad by your criteria?

Fromm: This is really a difficult question to answer, because we would have to examine the nature of this ecstasy. There is an ecstasy in which I am out of myself, and there is an ecstasy in which I am expanding myself, in which I experience myself out of the narrow confines of my separateness, and yet in which there is a sense of "I" rather than losing myself into something.

Smith: In our tradition to forget one's self has a kind of virtue. If it were to be complete, though, you think it would be bad.

Fromm: I wouldn't say complete. I think it is a qualitative difference. If I am terribly interested in something, I forget about my hunger, I forget about the noise I hear, and yet I am I because this I here is the I which is so interested.

Smith: The sense of identity then does not involve self-consciousness.



Fromm: On the contrary, I think the stronger and more secure the sense of identity is the more I can forget about myself.

Smith: I think there was one more. {13}

Fromm: I can deal with the last need very briefly. Because we are reflective beings we all have a need for a frame of orientation of what goes on in the world. If we do not have this frame of orientation, we are insane. This frame of orientation can be an irrational one which is full of illusions, or it can be a realistic one. The history of science and evolution of the human race is one in which this frame of orientation has been approximating more and more reality, the reality of nature, social reality, and the reality within ourselves. In other words, again I would say we need some frame of orientation, but we have the choice between one which is relatively approximate to reality and one which is a pipe dream, one which is unrealistic.

Smith: Can a person live without a sense of direction?

Fromm: I don't think so. I think people wouldn't be taken in by so many crazy and foolish and irrational ideas if they could dispense with any idea of what goes on, of what picture they get of the world.

Smith: You have given five needs of man. Is this an exhaustive list?

Fromm: Not at all. In fact, it isn't even a list. These are things which in my own thinking and observing of what I see of men have struck me as the most important ones. I am sure there is nothing final about it. In fact, I talk about them so simply because I consider them mostly as examples of the kind of need that we have to discover. I am sure there are others, or these can be changed. There is nothing final about it as in a list of instincts which we were so accustomed to thirty years ago.

Smith: But these are all pointing at things which you feel are rooted in the nature of man; and men, whatever their culture, whatever their time, as long as they are human, have these needs, and their fulfillment depends upon the meeting of them.

Fromm. Precisely.

Smith: What then would you propose coming out of this list?

Fromm: I would have to be very brief, although this is a question where one would wish to be very lengthy. I would say this: To really consider what the truly human needs of men are, and to differentiate them from the pseudo needs, which we so often cling to because we think this is human nature.

Smith: What are these?



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Fromm: Everybody knows them. We have the need for more gadgets, for more consumption, for more power, for more free time. We do everything to save time, and then we are terribly embarrassed when we have saved the time because we don't know what to do with it except killing it. Actually what a person thinks his needs are is not necessarily what they are. There is a notorious fact that there is nothing more deceptive than what people think about themselves. I would think our aim should be to recognize in the first place what are the true needs of man--the objectively valid needs, and not the needs which he thinks rightly or wrongly are his needs--and then indeed to go one step further; namely, to see that all our civilization should serve only one aim, that of further human development, the aim of the fulfillment of these genuine needs of man. Man is not a thing. Man has created many things. But these things have become his masters very often. I would say the consequence of all this would be to put man back into the saddle.

Smith: Thank you very much, Doctor Fromm, for these insights into the nature of man and the genuine needs which must be satisfied if he would reach fulfillment.