



Propriety of the Erich Fromm Document Center. For personal use only. Citation or publication of material prohibited without express written permission of the copyright holder.

Eigentum des Erich Fromm Dokumentationszentrums. Nutzung nur für persönliche Zwecke. Veröffentlichungen – auch von Teilen – bedürfen der schriftlichen Erlaubnis des Rechteinhabers.

## BOOKS

### THE ANATOMY OF HUMAN DESTRUCTIVENESS

Erich Fromm 521 pages  
Holt, Rinehart & Winston \$10.95

The demon who huddles in the darkest corner of the human heart and who requires stronger chains than any other is the impulse to destruction. We know him well; he is our guest. He has the face of death and a thousand masks to conceal his hatred of life. As in few other times, he has torn free and ravaged the body of man in our day.

So it is that Erich Fromm begins a contemplated major work on psychoanalytic theory, with this volume dissecting the impulse we humans have to hurt and destroy our own kind.

He first distinguishes: the kind of aggression man shares with animals is defensive, rational, and ordered to survival. Of a totally different nature is malignant aggression, the impulse to destroy that is peculiarly human though not universal. Thus Fromm sets himself off from the current un-

critical acceptance of instinctivism as popularized by Konrad Lorenz and his disciples, who specialize in animal studies. The instinctivist position, simply stated, is that man's aggressive behavior is univocal, a programmed, innate instinct, an un-governable drive, an evolutionary price.

Fromm is equally concerned with refuting the neobehaviorism of Skinner, whose model of plastic man able to be shaped to the need of some enlightened social engineer is so acceptable to our cybernetic society. The refutation of these two contemporary theories pursued carefully through the fields of neurophysiology, paleontology, and anthropology alone makes this study worthwhile. The author offers more: he would enunciate an alternative theory of malignant destructiveness, one more consonant with his own warm humanism.

The key to Fromm's approach is a further distinction between *instincts*—organic drives rooted in man's physiological needs—and *character*—the complex of specifically human passions, of noninstinctual strivings, through which man relates to his world. In describing what he means by "character," he unwittingly uses the scholastic terminology of "second

nature." Freud saw character as the outcome of the interaction between instinct and environment. Fromm rather views character as the result of certain existential needs of the human person, such as a frame of orientation, an object of devotion and sacredness, a bond of love and relationship, a sense of inner unity. Driven by these uniquely human needs, the person fashions a structure of rational and irrational passions proper to himself. "These passions move him and excite him; they are the stuff from which not only dreams but all religions, myths, drama, art are made—in short, all that makes life meaningful."

For Fromm, the determination of whether the character is a complex of destructive impulse or productive love is dependent on the social conditions and experience the person encounters in reaching out to meet his transcendent needs. The roots and typology of malignant aggression are related to the society which gives them birth. This is the heart of this book. As in his past work, Erich Fromm is unexcelled in unmasking the antihuman aspects of contemporary culture, its destructive death wish, its subtle but deeply rooted necrophilia.

Yet an objection must be voiced. One of the more intriguing parts of this book is the serious effort Fromm makes to free the truly insightful contributions of Freud from the historically conditioned limits of the master's vision and expression. Some day, someone must do the same for the author himself. He is still sadly locked in his own positivist presuppositions. Nature is the whole of reality; nothing transcends man; only the phenomenal is real. So he is forced, Procrustes-like, to reject the very signs of transcendent purpose in man his own study makes clear.

The point is not unimportant. If you define human nature, as Fromm does, as a constellation of needs responding predictably to social environment, then like it or not, you have eliminated freedom, the possibility of any ethic beyond enlightened self-interest, and have reduced reason to the "substitute intelligence" of the nonrational world. Anthropocentric humanism that denies transcendent reality is a contradiction.

As Tennyson says: "The stars, she whispers, 'blindly run.'" The stars do, but man does not. He freely chooses, not as freely as the medieval moralist thought nor as determinedly as psychoanalytic hypothesis suggests. But choose he must, and that's what loving or destroying is all about.

MICHAEL BRENNAN, C.P.

