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By Richard Davis

What produces character?

THE ANATOMY OF HUMAN DESTRUCTIVENESS

by Erich Fromm

Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York
1974

521 pp., \$10.95.

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Premier popular psychologist, maverick analytic theorist, apologist for ethical naturalism, moralistic commentator on American culture: Erich Fromm (EF). And this latest offering from his prolific pen reflects that many-sided man. He conceives this book (TAHD) as both the first volume of his psychoanalytic theory and as an attempt to address a fundamental human problem — aggression. In the context of current discussion, one way to read the book is as an analysis of “What is unique in man is that he can be driven by impulses to kill and to torture.”

That sentence by itself may make EF appear to be a hard-line “human aggressionist.” Quite the contrary. Actually, that an impulse is “unique” means that it is of relatively recent inception and not necessary, i.e., not biologically innate and thus eradicable. Indeed, the very uniqueness is a sign of hope — and this is EF’s major thesis — that “aggression can once again assume a minimal role in the fabric of human motivations.”

“Once again,” suggesting an earlier golden age, points to the central argument against a primary opponent: the neo-instinctivists (Freud, Lorenz). From his reading of the neurosciences and anthropology, EF maintains that there is no innate aggressive instinct. His basic argument contra innateness is that there are primitive human organizations in which the instinct does not exist. While men kill in those societies, it is only in self-defense, an instinctual response which ceases when the threat subsides. They manifest “benign aggression.” (For the

reader interested in evidence against Lorenz, this is a place to look.) EF’s other major opponents — those neobehaviorists (Skinner, et. al.) who reduce feelings to behavior and behavior to environment — form the background for his constructive account.

That account involves a fundamental distinction between benign (see above) and malignant aggression. The latter produces the vast majority of destructiveness and is a character-rooted passion (as distinct from a biologically-based instinct), taking the form of sadism or necrophilia. These passions, in turn, arise as man’s misguided attempts to deal with those “existential needs,” common to the species, which it is each man’s life task to solve. In the activity of malignant aggression, it is the need “to effect” which is being met. Thus, TAHD is finally a theory of character. Notice, in this regard, the central distinction between “benign” and “malignant” asserts what the behaviorist denies: that one can get behind the overt conduct (those visibly similar instances of aggression) to differentiate its causes, resident in character.

For EF, far from his being innately aggressive, man is biologically disposed toward empathy and love. What thwarted these strivings? The social circumstances under which one lives. Culture’s technical advance was at high cost: human manipulation and boredom. Without genuine stimulation, man turns to aggression. Thus, the imperative is to create the “environmental conditions that are conducive to full development of man’s potentialities.”

To evaluate EF’s major claims and evidence is beyond the scope of this introductory review, but a comment about two features of Fromm’s argument may help the reader in his own assessment. First, it is striking that EF never questions the fundamental assumption of his opponents: that if “phylogenetically innate,” then aggression (and its destructive effects) is virtually ineradicable. Surely we do not make that claim about other “innate instincts.” The reproductive drive, for one, has been amenable to social controls. Obviously, one would want to argue the aggression issue on its own; what is curious is that the question never arises. It does not, I suspect, because EF is so sure “malignant aggression” is not an innate impulse anyway. In overlooking the point, however, EF grants his opponents the benefit of a major, unexamined assumption.

Second, EF’s categorizing the vast amount of aggression as “malignant” places it in the category of pathology. This is reinforced by discussing it via lengthy studies of Stalin, Himmler, and Hitler. Again, the point of this kind of definition is both to recognize the fact of aggression and give grounds for eradication: it is not natural. (This, incidentally, is one of the few avenues open to the naturalist when his major norm, evolved human behavior, displays radical aberrations). But the latent effect of the tack is to relegate aggression to the pathological fringe, especially national leadership, and to miss its pervasiveness in the total human community.

TAHD raises a question more fundamental than the one it answers. Clearly, here, Fromm wants to validate his thesis that destructiveness is not innate but a characterological response, and so give hope for its eradication.

But his view would seem to drive him beyond TAHD, not to a second volume on psychoanalytic theory, but to a radical critique and reconstruction of social institutions. Without that, he is always saying the problem is “out there” without telling us very much about that rocky terrain or its restitution. To speak to this, in my view, is the imperative resident in his thought as we look toward EF’s promised second volume. (If he proceeds in the direction he implies, EF’s next book may need to be published by an underground press).

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