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Bygones

Rethinking Aggression

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The question of man's aggression (and particularly, his destructiveness) is one of the perennials. The arguments offered in its explanation usually fall somewhere between the extreme poles of instinctivism and behaviorism, positions that have attracted a number of devotees in the last decade or so.

Instinctivism got a big boost in 1966 with the publication of Konrad Lorenz's "On Aggression," which was given more credence by Robert Ardrey's works and Desmond Morris' "The Naked Ape."

BASICALLY, the instinctivists hold that man's aggressiveness is an innate tendency, bottled up and waiting for a chance to be expressed.

At the other end of the spectrum, behaviorism has become quite dominant in American thought through the works of B. F. Skinner, whose "Beyond Freedom and Dignity" enjoyed a lengthy stay on the best seller lists several years ago. To a behaviorist, talk of human tendencies or subjective forces is unscientific; the behaviorist is concerned with how a person behaves and the social conditioning that causes him to do so.

THE ARGUMENTS on both sides have been so strong as to divide many of the current thinkers into two battlegrounds; but in "The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness" (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, \$10.95), noted psychoanalyst Erich Fromm has come up with an alternative.

According to Fromm, "the present alternative between instinctivism and behaviorism is not favorable to theoretical progress. Both positions are 'monoexplanatory,' depending on dogmatic precon-

ceptions, and investigators who are required to fit data in one of the other explanation." Taking a sort of middle ground between the two, Fromm chides both sides for failing to distinguish between two types of human aggression — benign and malignant.

Benign aggression, "which (man) shares with all animals, is a phylogenetically programmed impulse to attack (or to flee) when vital interests are threatened." This kind of defensive aggression, says Fromm, "is biologically adaptive, and ceases when the threat has ceased to exist."

FROMM CLASSIFIES malignant aggression as "destructiveness and cruelty" and says it "is specific to the human species and virtually absent in most mammals. . . it has no purpose and its satisfaction is lustful."

Both types of aggression are complex, and each stems from different sources and possesses different qualities, says the author. With so many variables involved, a thorough study of the problem would have to include not only psychoanalysis, but such fields as anthropology, paleontology and neurophysiology—fields that Fromm has spent the last six years educating himself in.

Despite that, the author still finds himself giving certain premises of his argument in more or less outline form because a detailed presentation would take up so much room. (As it is, the book runs to more than 500 pages.) Thus, a full understanding of his thesis will require a great deal of research, which undoubtedly will be forthcoming from supporters and detractors.

But on the surface, his argument seems solid and appropriately rooted in human observation.



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