

COMMENTS ON THE FROMM MANUSCRIPT

-- Jerome D. Frank

Dr. Fromm has written a powerful sermon on good and evil. Its effectiveness is enhanced by his vocabulary and conceptual scheme, which make more sense to modern man than terms such as sin and salvation. His forceful reminder of the strength and pervasiveness of fascination with death and blood lust is a welcome and needed corrective to the popular shallow optimism that views humans as essentially altruistic and affiliative, encouraging the false hope that removal of economic and other frustrations (which are assumed to be the major cause of human destructiveness) would automatically lead to peace.

The discussion of senseless killing as an effort by man to overcome his sense of powerlessness, and the distinction between "reactive" and "compensatory" hostility on the one hand and "necrophilic" hostility on the other are especially illuminating.

How much Dr. Fromm's portrayal corresponds to the actual state of affairs is perhaps an irrelevant question, since this paper is, after all, an attempt to persuade rather than a scientific document. However, to promote discussion it may be well to mention a few reservations, which are made very tentatively because I am not nearly as well informed as Dr. Fromm about history, economics and politics.

First, the delineation of necrophilic and biophilic personality types is essentially a literary exercise, with an honorable lineage tracing back at least to Theophrastus. The skill of the writer makes them convincing, but they are, after all, abstractions, and it would take



a lot of research to test their validity.

Many would question the assumption that modern industrial society promotes necrophilia. How do we know that necrophilia was not as prominent an aspect of pre-industrial societies? Certainly, bouts of senseless killing and wars of extermination have erupted periodically since the dawn of history.

In fact, one could turn the argument around and assert that no people on earth have been as sensitive to the welfare of others, as respectful of their individuality, and as considerate in their personal relationships as Americans today, and this has made us more aware of the dehumanizing forces that have always been present. Perhaps our fascination with violence and our willingness to commit genocide on distant groups may be intensified by the suppression of hostile impulses in our own relationships.

Furthermore, the emphasis on violence may be primarily another manifestation of the search for emotional arousal in our culture, also seen in the barrage of sexual stimuli and rising rates of delinquency, alcoholism and addiction. The hunger for excitement may be just as basic a human propensity as necrophilia and the source of just as much mishhief when life becomes so comfortable that it is boring. Under less favorable living conditions, the need for stimulation (which may be present in all living organisms, not just humans) is abundantly satisfied by the ordinary vicissitudes of life. We have to create our thrills artificially.

Some of these questions might be clarified by the suggestion for a research program described in the footnote starting on page 32. Such a survey, preferably conducted in several countries, would be of great practical as well as theoretical value.



Comments on the Fromm Manuscript--2--Jerome D. Frank

Dr. Fromm's analysis may not give sufficient weight to the great power of group standards in influencing the individual's choice towards necrophilic or biophilic behavior. As far as their own natures go, I believe that most of the SS men who publicly burned little children alive, and the Hindus who abjured violence in the face of death would be interchangeable. (Indeed, some of the same Hindus who followed Gandhi participated in the Hindu-Moslem violence following partition.) If this speculation is valid, then, in addition to strengthening biophilic and weakening necrophilic trends by the means Dr. Fromm suggests, a more practical approach may be to try to strengthen group standards that oppose war and foster resort to non-destructive measures for resolution of international conflict. This can be done (and is being done) through mass media, and efforts to influence political leaders and other standard-setters directly.

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