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The Heart of Erich Fromm

**The Heart of Man:
Its Genius for Good and Evil**
by Erich Fromm.

(Religious Perspectives,
edited by Ruth Nanda Anshen)
Harper & Row, 156 pp., \$3.75

Abraham Kaplan

Professional philosophers have seldom done all the work of philosophy. (There are people who doubt whether today they are doing *any* of it.) At various times the aspirations and perspectives of society have been articulated by mathematicians, priests, scientists, lawyers, and men of letters, and, in our time, particularly by psychiatrists. Whatever the preoccupation of the academies, the ideas of Freud and his successors have undeniably had a profound influence on our conceptions of human nature and destiny.

By profession Erich Fromm is a psychoanalyst, but his calling is philo-

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sophy, at least in aims if not in methods. "The analyst is not a theologian or a philosopher and does not claim competence in those fields," he once wrote, "but as a physician of the soul he is concerned with the very same problems as philosophy and theology: the soul of man and its cure." *The Heart of Man* is the most recent of a series of books in which Fromm diagnoses and prescribes for the modern "sickness of soul": *Escape from Freedom*, *Man for Himself*, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, *The Sane Society*, *The Art of Loving*, *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*, and *The Dogma of Christ*. (In one or two other books he is also a physician for the body politic, but, as might be expected, in these much less of the philosophic temper is in evidence.)

Fromm has little use, however, for those who, like Jung and the "existential psychoanalysts," mix metaphysics

into their psychology. His philosophy comes out in his conclusions, without (he thinks) infecting his premises. What he shares with the existentialists is the basic tenet that the statement, "Man is not a thing" is "the central topic of the ethical problem of modern man." The existentialists hold that the difference between man and things is that what a man is (his essence) is what he makes of himself in his concrete existence, while what things are is predetermined. Fromm rightly sees that human potentialities are limited and their actualizations guided by human nature and its needs.

Fromm's conception of man, like Aristotle's and Spinoza's, from both of whom he borrows so much, is biologically rather than metaphysically based. Where the existentialists see man's salvation in his capacity for commitment, for decision and action, Fromm looks to man's capacity for awareness, for realism and rationality. With Freud and Marx he shares the postulate that to understand is to transcend: con-



sciousness of who and what we reveals our true interests and directs us to their fulfillment. This intellectualist bent makes Fromm much easier to read than the existentialists and most others who write of sickness of soul. But there are two philosophic faults (of which Whitehead and Russell are said to have accused each other): to be simple-minded and to be muddle-headed. Fromm's simplifications are not always improvements over the muddles.

His starting-point is that ethical norms are based on the nature of man, not on revelation or on man-made rules. The aim of man's life is "the unfolding of his powers according to the laws of his nature"; all our achievements "make sense only if they are means to one end: the full birth of man, as he becomes fully himself, fully human."

But Fromm insists we must know what our human nature is: evil is rooted in ignorance. Conventional morality laments that "people are too much concerned with their self-interest"; the trouble is rather that "they are not concerned enough with the interest of their real self." When this real self is too much hidden from us, we act unnaturally, destroying both ourselves and others: depravity is disease, "Neurosis itself is, in the last analysis, a symptom of moral failure"; conversely, "mental health is achieved if man develops into full maturity according to the characteristics and laws of human nature."

Man is by nature good, but behaving naturally is not easy: the forces of evil are also strong, and disease itself has a natural basis. There is a "syndrome of decay" as well as of growth, and its prominence, especially in our time, makes Fromm reject a "sentimental optimism." The syndrome of decay is marked by dependency, narcissism, and above all the love of death. (He cites Hitler as the best documented example of a man suffering from this syndrome.)

Growth is creation, and decay, destruction. "The man who cannot create wants to destroy," for only by doing one or the other can he "transcend his role as a mere creature," do something rather than be done by. At the extremes, the lover of life is a saint and the lover of death is insane: "most people are a particular blend." We exploit others, or reduce what is most human to a mere commodity ("the marketing orientation"): the act of love becomes an exchange of favors. Even our selfishness is not self-love but an exploitation of the self by the self (the smoker who "cannot" quit) or a succession of deals with the self (the compulsive drinker). In contrast is the "productive orientation" expressed in the syndrome of growth: "the active and creative relatedness of man to his fellow man, to himself, and to nature." This orientation leads to "spontaneous" activity in which we act rather than

nothing to say about art and very little about science (and that mostly hostile). For him "productiveness" is everything: "to be alive means to be productive"; it is the only meaning of life, even "the basis of rational faith." Our productive powers are those whose full use gives us joy, as distinct from the "satisfaction" of needs and the "gratification" in achievement. Love ("genuine" love, that is) is "rooted in productiveness"—whether causally dependent on productiveness or logically implied by it is unclear: Fromm's conceptual framework is loosely jointed. The aim of analytic therapy is "to help the patient gain or regain his capacity for love." In admirable opposition to the self-improvement cult, Fromm emphasizes that the primary problem is loving rather than being loved.



As to particulars, however, his analysis is disappointingly conventional: "Love is union with somebody, or something, outside oneself (but self-love also can be genuine), under the condition of retaining the separateness and integrity of one's own self." Its components are "care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge," of both self and another. What Fromm contributes to this familiar material is his treatment of it as constituting "an attitude, an orientation of character" rather than a relationship to a specific person. "Had it any been but she, and that very face . . ." is romantic nonsense.

But Fromm has his own romanticism in the centrality he assigns to loneliness (a theme that runs from Rousseau through Carlyle and Nietzsche, to say nothing of the existentialists): "The deepest need of man is the need to overcome his separateness, to leave the prison of his aloneness." Life is at bottom a predicament from which we are rescued by love: but most of us remain imprisoned in a "symbiotic union" of mutual dependency (or even—in the pathological extreme—of a mutually destructive sadomasochism) Between these two roman-

consequences," is in striking accord with the conception of John Dewey, though with Fromm's European background he rarely refers to the American pragmatists. The character-structure of the free man, Fromm tells us, is under constant pressure from social forces as well as from inner compulsions. We escape from freedom either by submission to a leader, as in the Fascist countries, or by the conformity "prevalent in our own democracy." Fromm has unceasingly emphasized (and perhaps by now, hopefully, over-emphasized) the importance in our society of anonymous, invisible authority. The growth of bureaucracy and regimentation, and the dehumanizing effect of sheer organization constitute what he sees as the greatest threat to freedom (on both sides of the iron curtain): "the danger of the future is that men may become robots."

The fully mature, productive, free, and loving personality—this, he tells us, is an ideal of religion as well, though it is couched in another idiom. The goal is to overcome our fundamental narcissism, transcend nature by becoming aware of what we truly are. Ours is a secular culture basically because we refuse to face the contradiction within ourselves of being in nature and simultaneously transcending it. Yet we must face the contradiction one way or another. Reversing Freud's interpretation of religion as a collective neurosis, Fromm sees neurosis as "a private form of religion," a way of coming to terms, however inadequately, with our humanity. Our religion has become an empty shell, idolatrous because it expresses only a neurotic dependency. To be sure, religion has always served as an opiate—Fromm owes as much to Marx as to Freud. "God is always the ally of the rulers"; religion helps the majority "accept emotionally their class situation," and gives the minority "relief from guilt feelings caused by the suffering of those whom they oppress." But religion also reflects "man's spiritual evolution," his groping realization of the potentialities in his humanity. The attack on religion was once a fight for rationality and freedom; "today the lack of faith is the expression of profound confusion and despair."

For this despair too Fromm has his diagnostic formula. It is due to *alienation*, "the fact that man does not experience himself as the active bearer of his own powers and richness, but as an impoverished 'thing,' dependent on powers outside of himself." Bureaucratic industrialism has robbed man's life of meaning, making of him "a cog in a large machine, an automaton." Throughout the Western world, our problem is boredom. Fromm sees modern man as "actually close to the picture Huxley describes in his *Brave New World*: well fed, well clad, satisfied sexually, yet without self." Here



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"Productiveness," I must admit, has the merit of a more objective locus than the "creativity" so fashionable today. But to my ears it connotes more labor than love, more plodding than love, more plodding than the free play of ideas and materials. Fromm has

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Fromm is best at, and is best known for, his analysis of the interplay of dependency and freedom. He gives to the philosophical treatment of human freedom by the Stoics, Spinoza, and Kant a new psychological depth and substance. The outcome, that freedom is "acting on the basis of the awareness of alternatives and their

ty. The growth of bureaucracy and regimentation, and the dehumanizing effect of sheer organization constitute what he sees as the greatest threat to freedom (on both sides of the iron curtain): "the danger of the future that men may become robots."

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tional or religious identity. Instead
transcending the self we destroy it—
a group narcissism.

And we are all of us sinners:
at Fromm is describing he calls the
athology of "normalcy." Here
omm's critique reaches a climax: it
society as a whole that is sick.
omm does an important service, I
lieve, in countering the cynicism of
ewing mental health as only relative
the culture ("what we think is in-
ne would be quite sane among the
..."). The question is always what
nd of society the individual is "ad-
sted" to, and even more fundamen-
ly, whether he is adjusted to him-
lf and to the real world. Objectivity
d rationality, and the capacity to
re and to create, are not brought
to being merely by cultural defini-
on. A society can encourage or thwart
e development of these capacities. It
a sick society if its members are
ppled, and crippled by the institu-
ons and patterns of the society. This
the sickness that Fromm sees every-
ere, so pandemic that "the real
question is why most people do not
come insane." As is so often the case
philosophy, his question is more re-
arding than the answer he gives over
ad over again: what "truly over-
comes potential insanity is the full, pro-
active response to the world."

Yet in its broadest terms I do not
ow that any better answer has been
ven, and surely few have been pre-
ented with more reasonable eloquence.
or his banner Fromm might well
oose e. e. cummings' marvelous line,
the single secret still is man." Fromm
alls his position "normative human-
ism," and certainly humanity needs all
the friends it can get. One of Fromm's
any epigrams runs: "In the nine-

teenth century the problem was that
God is dead; in the twentieth century
the problem is that *man is dead*."
Man is surely at least on the critical
list.

The task Fromm sets us is that
defined by Emerson: things are in the
saddle and ride mankind; we must put
man back into the saddle. Our choice,
as he sees it, is between barbarism,
even without the occurrence of nuclear
war, or "a renaissance of our human-
ist tradition." We have defeated the
belief in the legitimacy of human in-
equality; we must now surmount the
group narcissism that threatens to re-
place it. Ultimately, a new religion is
called for, universalistic and humanis-
tic, whose God will be "a symbol of
man's own powers which he tries to
realize in his life." But it is hard to pray
to "our Powers and the Powers of our
fathers . . ." Fromm tries to avoid the
fallacy of "psychologism"—assuming that
all the problems of modern man can be
understood just in psychological terms.
He insists that changes must be made
simultaneously in all spheres—political,
economic, social, and religious, as well
as psychological. But what he says
about these other factors is often
naive: we must rewrite history text-
books, and make movies "which foster
pride in the development of the
human race." He does not see that
the difficulties often lie in the inter-
relations among these factors—how will
we get the movies to be shown in Com-
munist China?

It is Fromm's clinical insights rather
than his theoretical constructions
that are the more impressive. He pro-
poses to substitute the philosophical
framework of "dialectical humanism"
for Freud's mechanistic materialism.
But Freud was at any rate a scient-
ist, as science was conceived in his

day, Fromm extols the scientific atti-
tude, but then insists that we cannot
understand man by the methods of sci-
ence; "the knowledge of man is possi-
ble only in the process of relating our-
selves to him." In his own account of
this process it is impossible to distin-
guish observation from inference, em-
pirical data from speculation, descrip-
tion from explanation.

The fundamental issue, on which all
else depends, is the logic by which
values are deduced from facts.
Fromm's central thesis is that "moral
norms are based upon man's inherent
qualities," upon his nature. But human
nature is much more indeterminate
than Fromm acknowledges. Growth
and maturation are not enough to de-
fine value: cancers also "grow."
Freud's concept of "regression," which
has a factual reference, is given an il-
licit valuational sense by being con-
trasted with what is "progressive"
(who can deny that "progress" is
good?). Fromm's value premises are
concealed by his Platonist semantics:
words mean only what the user has
decided beforehand is ideal for things
of that kind. We must become fully
"human," "mature," "productive,"
"loving," and so on; what Fromm does
not value is not *really* "human" and
"mature."

Yet his values are admirable, and
even more admirable is the courage
of his commitment to them. Fromm's
final assessment of the modern world
is this: "Most facts seem to indicate
that man is choosing robotism, and
that means, in the long run, insanity
and destruction. But all these facts are
not strong enough to destroy faith in
man's reason, good will and sanity."
It is this faith that is Fromm's great-
est virtue, and for it he deserves our
admiration. □



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