



Commentary on "ON THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CAUSES OF WAR" by Eric Fromm

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Doctor Fromm has made a considerable effort to relate the psychological nature of man to the social phenomenon of war. He has moved through the familiar channel which begins with man's aggressiveness, but has distinguished his contribution from the more traditional views of personality by a new dichotomy. His characterization of a "death loving" and "life loving" orientation have a superficial resemblance to the familiar psychoanalytic notions of aggressive and erotic instincts. But one wonders at first why it is necessary to introduce new terminology for old phenomena. Doctor Fromm appears to have gone beyond hypothesizing the presence of certain drives he thus relabels to the elaborate characterization of personality types whose orientation is directed towards death on the one hand, and life on the other.

Nominally an objective and thoughtful view by a student of the human personality, Doctor Fromm's descriptions tread dangerously close to a theological moralism. His way out of the wolf-sheep dilemma, presumably by suggesting some kind of synthesis of the two, seems only to heighten the dilemma even more. His effort to characterize the typical personalities in such stark and extreme terms leads one to the uncomfortable conclusion that there are in fact two species of people: the good and the bad, those for life and those against. If one is to conclude that the object of living is to expunge those "alien" wishes for death, as Doctor Fromm suggests, there is little to distinguish this "modern" view from the mediaeval concept of converting the diseased or the deviant by exorcising the devil that lies within.

Doctor Fromm's dichotomy departs from traditional psychoanalytic thought by suggesting that the death instinct--his "death loving" drive--is exclusively negative, murderous and destructive. In a like manner, its opposite is conceived as being equally pure. This picture hardly conforms to the complex patterns of human behavior which confront the clinician. We are accustomed to seeing human aggressivity manifest itself in a virtual spectrum of behaviors; self-assertiveness, ambitious promotion-seeking, passive-aggressive resistance, overt violence, and unprovoked murder, for example. Though all these are reflections of what may be called the aggressive drive, they range widely from extremes of personal and social effectiveness, to the worst sort of destructive urges which Doctor Fromm describes. One may similarly outline a range of attitudes and behaviors which reflect the erotic drive, from extremes of destructiveness to those idealized heights of life-loving of which Doctor Fromm speaks. Altruistic self-sacrifice, generous tolerant acceptance, greedy material acquisition, narcissistic self-aggrandizement, and euthanasia of a dearly beloved but suffering spouse are examples of the variability of drive expression.



Examination of each of these modes of behavior would suggest that they are composed of mixtures of both the aggressive and the erotic drives towards need-fulfillment, modified by mechanisms of the personality in conformity with countervailing pressures from its own conscience and from the environment.

It seems to me that any view of the nature of man which hopes to reflect the way he is rather than the way we wish him to be must account for this great interwoven complexity of the aggressive and erotic drives. Most behaviors are influenced in their goal, their intent, their need-fulfilling efficiency, and their object of attention by both drives, and rarely by one or the other alone. The proportions of the "mix" can of course vary from individual to individual, but also from time to time and circumstance to circumstance within the same person. Ruthless behavior of the executive and his efforts to keep his company alive and competitive may be psychologically akin to his vigorous and successful game of squash. To insist that his aggressive behavior, in the office or on the squash court, is therefore a sign of a wish for or an interest in death, and therefore "bad", is to reduce the complexities of a dynamic process to an inadequate and oversimplified formula. It is unquestionably useful to consider that many subtly destructive behaviors are an expression of a "death instinct." Such clinical examples as the diabetic who refuses to take insulin, the chronic alcoholic who "drinks himself to death," the poly-surgical patient or the severely accident-prone individual, may all be cases in point. But the labeling of the great range of manifestations of aggressivity--presumably all arising from the same instinctual origins, but many of which are constructive rather than destructive--deprives us of discriminating nuances by lumping them all in the same pot.

Apart from the inapplicability to clinically recognized phenomena which such a simplification produces, I was struck by the presumptions which this view makes about death itself. The implication emerges that since destruction leads to death, destruction is therefore equivalent to death. Destruction is something we have witnessed but no one has experienced death and returned to describe it. It is quite possible that this identity is not accurate. There are those, for example, who consider death to be the natural and appropriate outcome to a busy and rewarding life; for others, death may be a surcease from pain and a longed-for rest. The analogies of death and sleep do not pass unnoticed. To presume simply that death equals badness is to create an ethic which confuses and distracts a logical inquiry. It is not to talk about reality, since it is a reality about which we know nothing.

This opposition of life with death leave no room for the consideration of the role of anxiety. It fails to consider that anxiety itself, mobilized by real or perceived threat, can lead to all manner of destruction outcomes which are simply motivated by an urge to defend, no matter how benighted that urge may be. To declare anxiety, therefore, "death-loving" would be to ignore its powerfully constructive effects. It is a frequently observed fact that a major difference between a constructive and destructive outcome may be a quantitative one: too much anxiety may paralyze, or lead to impetuous action and hence to damage or even destruction. Only a little less anxiety may however mobilize appropriate corrective action with a constructive outcome. It is not clear how can this subtle, variable and highly responsive phenomenon be easily dichotomized as "death-loving" or "life-loving."



Doctor Fromm presses us to accept a "two species of man" view of mankind with his declaration that the generally acknowledged "solution" of synthesis of these polar drives is the "fundamental perversion." This rejection of the synthetic solution requires that we sue for psychic divorce, rudely dissociating from within the very forces which have so powerfully stimulated so much of human endeavor which is creative. There are many who believe that the magnificent creations of art, literature, and philosophy, to mention just a few, are the result of the Hegelian synthesis of intrapsychic conflict. On a more pedestrian plane, one may cite the response to one's own unacceptable impulses by developing its opposite: the industrial magnate turned philanthropist, the messy child who becomes orderly and careful, and so on. There is much to be said for the creative role of conflict, both within the personality and within the society.

To live in a psychic world where all is "good and pure," where struggle and conflict is absent, predisposes to a kind of lotus-eating indolence and an indifference to everything else. The dangers of satiety are fully as great as those of deprivation. Struggle is life and life is an incessant sequence of struggles.

This struggle to meld contradictory pressures is in fact considered lost when the individual resorts to a total embrace of one pressure and a total denial of the other. Impulsive people, ego centric, infantile people, ascetic and schizoid people all represent failures in various degree of this vital synthetic process. Resolution of this struggle amounts to more than drawing moralistic definitions of the "good" and urging their adoption.

Beyond this, to contrast the affects of man so sharply faces us immediately with violent contradictions whose resolution can only be semantic if these polarities are all we are allowed. One cannot obviously die for one's country, because this, according to Doctor Fromm, is love of death rather than love of country. One cannot die for the defense of one's family, because this is the love of death, not a wish to preserve one's family. One can no longer hold the notion that to give one's most treasured possession for a cause or a belief is honorable; to be so wasteful of life is to be death-loving, and by Doctor Fromm's ethic, bad, no matter how vaunted or grand the abstraction which motivated it. To reduce the ethics of human response to such a simply paradigm does violence to our views of ethics itself, quite apart from its failure to objectify the forces within the human personality.

Lastly, I am troubled by the notion, as Doctor Fromm seems to imply, that "preparations for nuclear war" are merely an expression of attraction to death. It is possible for example that the fear of being weak or of being over-run may stimulate a belief that these dangers could somehow be avoided by strength. At a national level, this belief is translated into armies, and weapons of all kinds, including the ultimate nuclear weapons. To characterize this understandable concern for safety and self-preservation as "death-loving" because, if extended to its contemporaneous extreme, it could lead to death, is to confuse the means with the end. To judge a process by its outcome is surely one method of describing it, but it does not seem to be an adequate way of characterizing the well-springs of fear which may give rise to it.



The paradox is even greater, since most of those who genuinely support the very elements of our national nuclear war-making capacity which could lead to their own destruction are also genuinely desirous of avoiding nuclear catastrophe. This paradox of serving life by relying upon weapons of death is a psychological question which sorely needs to be better understood. Its explication is needed if we are to propose reasonable alternatives that people can not only see, but also accept. The psychological dilemma of reacting to threat by mounting counter-threat, even at the cost of one's life, is not an easy one to resolve, and it leaves me dissatisfied to resolve it by a semantic description of this behavior as an example of "death loving." I would suspect that we must descend to more complex levels of abstraction within the human psyche if we are to see to the bottom of this perplexing and potentially annihilating paradox.

Though I find much in Doctor Fromm's psychology and ethics with which to disagree, I strongly concur that the psychology of previous wars no longer applies when one turns to a discussion of thermonuclear war. It is a fact that most people have failed to grasp the enormous magnitude of difference from "old-style" to "new-style" war. This phenomenon, often characterized as "denial," may be more complicated than that. The development of attitudes appropriate to a phenomenon are dependent upon some experience with it. There are few of us, indeed, and perhaps none, who have a realistic conception of "megaton" in spite of our verbal facility about it. Although our critical times demand that we press our understanding of the forces which threaten us, it may exceed human limits to expect most people rapidly to develop new conceptions about phenomena they have never experienced and can scarcely imagine. There are times when mere cognitive comprehension is inadequate to the task. One may well ask here how "emotional learning" can be acquired about a thing so terrible as thermonuclear war, without having to suffer the experience of it. There is here an inherent problem in providing people with enough awareness of the dimensions of this reality in vital, emotional terms that will enable them to think seriously of alternative solutions to those now predominating.

It would seem to me that the eventual capacity to recognize the potential destructiveness that can come from the reliance upon "nuclear defense" can arise only when people discover that strength means other things than the capacity to destroy. In the immediate lives of most of us, "strength of character" is recognized as being stronger than the gun carried by the fearful and insecure adolescent. By what means such concepts as "strength of character" can be translated into national terms and then suffused into national behavior is a question for which I have no answer. But it seems apparent that the failure to find a lasting belief in sources of strength other than weapons alone can lead only to the devastating outcome that all of us consider so possible.