

WHY WE KILL

The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness. By Erich Fromm. Holt, Rinehart and Winston. 521 pages.

Necrophilia, love of the dead, is ultimately what Erich Fromm's latest and most ambitious work, "The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness," is all about. Ambitious because in setting as his task an explanation of human destructive—that is, malignant—behavior, Fromm is actually constructing a theory of human nature and an answer to the perennial "problem of evil," as well as offering specific explanations of destructive episodes like acts of torture and murder or terroristic acts of war like napalming in Indochina.

Fromm begins by rejecting two opposite theories of

behavior, both of which have become popular in mid-Twentieth Century, but both of which are inimicable to Fromm as a humanist and untenable to him as a scientist: One is *behaviorism*, which looks only to overt behavior and assumes it to be limitlessly manipulable; the other is *instinctivism*, which assumes certain basic drives, including "aggressiveness," to be biologically innate in man. While rejecting both views as simplistic, Fromm concerns himself primarily with refuting the instinctive position, as formulated by Lorenz and popularized by Ardrey ("The Territorial Imperative.") and Morris ("The Naked Ape.") and Fromm amasses an impressive array of evidence from neurophysiology, anthropology, psychology and virtually every other scientific discipline touching on the study of human behavior that as a matter of fact there is no basis for the belief in innate destructiveness.

Fromm first of all makes some useful distinctions among the various kinds of behavior that have loosely been labeled as "aggressive." For example the popularizers of instinctivism have spoken as if aggressiveness were somehow connected with predatory behavior. But Fromm carefully demonstrates that the two behavior syndromes are quite distinct, for predatory animals are not notably aggressive either toward their own kind or even toward the other species around them. In any case, more tellingly, there is no evidence that man is the inheritor of a predator's biological programming. As recent studies of chimps and gorillas have shown, not even primates closest to man, though omnivores, have any predatory characteristics. Moreover, these studies have demonstrated the generally sociable and cooperative behavior of these animals. Fromm argues further, though rather less convincingly, that the evidence indicates that prehistoric man, though (unlike his pri-

mate cousins) a hunter, similarly had a social life "characterized by a minimum of destructiveness and an optimum of cooperation and sharing."

Impact of cities

It was not until the formation of cities in the third millennium B.C., Fromm theorizes, that the division of labor and concentration of surplus wealth led to the possibilities of rigid class distinctions, exploitation, war and the syndromes of aggressiveness and large scale destructiveness and cruelty that have now been postulated as "instinctive." But even here Fromm sees a fundamental distinction slurred over by the common use of the word "aggression": the distinction between aggressiveness that is defensive, a response to life-threatening situations (which for man would include threats to freedom of movement and expression as well as to life directly), and aggressiveness that is malignant. The former — benign aggressiveness — though unfortunate, is life-serving and thus encompassed within the general natural programming for survival. It is malignant aggression, cruel and destructive behavior, which is "life strangling," that is virtually unique to modern man and which needs explanation, to which end Fromm devotes the major portion of his book.

That life-strangling behavior, peculiar to the human species and to the relatively recent history of the species, could be explained in terms of evolved instincts is, to Fromm, absurd. Instead, he analyzes this behavior as falling into large categories, sadism (the passion for god-like control) and necrophilia (the passion for death and dead things), which are "character-rooted passions."

Fromm's own speculation, bolstered by psychobiographies, which conclude the book, of Himmler and Hitler, is that sadism and necrophilia represent quite recognizable behavior syndromes and that they are more or less malignant forms of the

anal-compulsive personality, perhaps originating ultimately in a malignant Oedipal relationship, that is, a cold, non-empathetic, "autistic" bond to the mother.

Remove the malignancy

Fromm's conclusion from all of this is an "ambiguity of hope." As far as benign aggressiveness is concerned, since it is life-serving, it is part of the survival programming and cannot be uprooted directly. Rather the task and the hope is to construct "a society in which no one is threatened: not the child by the parent; not the parent by the superior; no social class by another; no nation by a superpower." But by the same token, such reforms should make it possible, according to Fromm, actually to reduce the malignant aggressions themselves; since they are not innate but in a sense unnatural, they should decline under conditions favorable to the full development of man's genuine needs and capacities.

Fromm's book appears at a critical time in the history of ideas. One has the impression that the book, like Macduff, was from its "womb untimely ripped," for so much of the relevant evidence is barely sketched, or even omitted, so much of the research is so obviously in progress. Ultimately the scope of the book demands a multi-volume treatment, like Fraser's "Golden Bough" or Toynbee's "History." So there is a rough, dissertation quality to the book as in the opening chapters Fromm wrestles with disciplines like biochemistry of which he is admittedly not master. But we are fortunate to have the book at this time, and the work becomes increasingly interesting and persuasive as we read through it, culminating in the brilliant analyses of sadism and necrophilia, and an extremely penetrating critique of Freud's theory of aggressiveness and destructiveness, a real contribution to the history of psychoanalytic theory.

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