



Propriety of the Erich Fromm Document Center. For personal use only. Citation or publication of material prohibited without express written permission of the copyright holder.

Eigentum des Erich Fromm Dokumentationszentrums. Nutzung nur für persönliche Zwecke. Veröffentlichungen – auch von Teilen – bedürfen der schriftlichen Erlaubnis des Rechteinhabers.

Mankind bewildered between having and being

Birmingham Post
18. 2. 78

To Have or to be. By Erich Fromm. (Cape, £4.95).
The Human Situation. By Aldous Huxley. (Chatto, £4.95).

By MARK THOMAS

Are you currently out to make sure of your quick dash for possessions? (Eternally hoping, of course, that you will not be the hindmost the Devil must inevitably take when you believe in endless material growth in a finite environment).

Or, as you wander weakly home, do you feel that diminishing material rewards are demanding solutions about personal priorities — solutions you have so consistently ducked?

Whichever way the mood of the time has prompted you to react, you are not alone. If it is ever possible to push aside for a moment those countries with less economic and psychological muscle than our own, reflect that we need a four per cent growth rate to stand still economically — a growth rate we are unlikely to achieve. This, if nothing else, must concentrate even the most dormant mind wonderfully.

Two distinguished minds here concentrate our minds still further. Both men have found ears in the past: the late Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and Erich Fromm's *The Art of Loving* have been translated into eighteen languages; they should find ears now.

Neither of these books is finally depressing, just so long as you believe change and growth are possible — both in yourself and in others. Although they both paint

our position on the brink of ecological, spiritual and psychological disaster, both writers concentrate on the potentialities of the human being.

Indeed, for Fromm, the choice between human *being*, rather than human *having*, is the central issue which he examines; these modes of living are quite opposed. The having mode centres on things: ownership, acquisitiveness, quantity of experience, power and aggression. It is the basis of greed, envy, violence, fake people and isolation.

The being mode centres on people: sharing, giving, sacrificing, the quality of experience and activity. It is the basis of love. For Fromm, the most familiar suicide of this era is the "person" who says "I am not myself; but I am what I have."

While recognising that some having is essential to any being, Fromm hares off into the major corners and levels of our existence. If this premise seems simple, it is extraordinary fruitful and illuminating, particularly when he includes the intimate experiences of God and love, activities we all too often turn into things.

His conclusion involves a massive psychic reorientation of society. This is the basis of

another book. The only pity is that he summaries the aims and results, winding up sloganising.

Huxley also begs us to reconsider, ending his book with Cromwell's stirring words, "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken." The charm of the man is much in evidence. His book is packed with fascinating and appalling, wayside detail (remember he gave us the source for John Whiting's play and Ken Russell's film, *The Devils*).

Huxley attempts to link worlds: the world of abstraction and concepts with the world of immediate experience; the world of spiritual insight with the world of objective observation. Some of his links may be fanciful, but they are just as surely provocative.

Both these humanists are grapplers. Neither book provides a retreat where doers or thinkers can find easy mental resting places. My hope is that those who are in command read these books and appreciate the far-reaching effects of their often short-term solutions.

From next week the Birmingham Post books page will appear on Thursdays.