

5. Beyond Fairness: Erich Fromm and the World Ethos Project

The task we must set for ourselves is not to feel secure, but to be able to tolerate insecurity. [...] Love is possible only if two people communicate with each other from the centre of their existences, hence if each one of them experiences himself from the centre of his existence.

Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*

Introduction

Erich Fromm (1900-1980) and Hans Küng were not known to be great friends or allies; the juxtaposition of the Weltethos Institut and Erich Fromm Institut on Tübingen's Hintere Grabenstraße owes itself to the idiosyncracies of *Weltethos* (and Fromm) donor Karl Schlecht, who sees the two as contributing to the same overall trust-building project. The third member of this 'Karl Schlecht trio' is the China Centre Tübingen, which works closely with Tu Weiming's World Ethics Institute at Peking University; the Fromm Institut serves as a metaphorical bridge between the 'thin' contractarianism of the defenders of the letter of the *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic* and Tu's 'spiritual humanism', a 'thicker' understanding of the World Ethos idea.

Fromm's brand of post-Freudian psychoanalysis is far from fashionable or cutting-edge in the brave new 21st-century world of cognitive neuroscience. This does not necessarily mean, however, that Fromm's humanistic insights in works like *The Art of Loving* (1956) and *To Have or to Be* (1976) have lost their relevance; one is at least obliged to ask whether the donor's vision of a common project across these three seemingly disparate institutes is a realistic one, and whether a kernel of wisdom for the World Ethos project can be extracted, nearly four decades after his death, from Fromm's vast corpus.

Torpedoing the Golden Rule: Fromm's 'Humanistic Protest' Against Capitalism

In the course of his mid-century critiques of 'capitalism', Fromm targeted the embrace of the 'Golden Rule' by purveyors of interreligious and intercultural dialogue - a movement which reached its apotheosis with the 1993 *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic* - as a form of counterproductive cynicism:

'I'll give you just as much as you give me,' whether of material goods or love: so runs the highest maxim of capitalist morality. One could even say that the development of this ethic of 'fairness' is the distinguishing ethical contribution [to humanity] of capitalist society.

[...] This fairness ethic is easily assimilated to the Golden Rule: 'Don't do to others what you don't want them to do to you' can easily be interpreted as 'Be fair to others in your dealings with them.' The original folk formulation of the biblical Commandment, however, is 'Love thy

neighbour as thyself'; in reality, the Judeo-Christian command to love one's neighbour is something utterly distinct from an ethic of fairness. To 'love one's neighbour' means to feel responsible for her and united with her, while a fairness ethic implies that one feels neither responsible nor emotionally invested, but rather separate and distant; it means that one respects one's neighbour's rights, but not that one loves her. It is no coincidence that the Golden Rule has become the most popular religious maxim of our day; since one can understand it in the sense of an ethic of fairness, it is the only religious maxim that everyone can understand and is ready to practise. But if one wants to practise *love*, one must understand the difference between love and fairness.¹⁹⁶

Fromm highlights here the eternal problem of reducing ethics to maxims or principles: the outward endorsement of principles, even of the Golden Rule itself, alone tells us nothing about moral *motivation*. A World *Ethos*, while much less than a totalitarian attempt to control the hearts and minds of the global population with a new religious dogma or doctrine, is nevertheless a humanistic and 'spiritual' project in the sense that it transcends self-centred fairness to encompass an active form of love. Karl Schlecht himself sees this *ethos* as the key to a more humanistic (and productive) global economy of self-motivated workers: those capable of loving others will love the jobs they do because they are motivated to serve the objects of their love, not in the perverted, fascistic sense of '*Arbeit macht frei*', but in the sense of autonomously chosen responsibility, of 'wanting to do what one ought to do' in Fromm's idiom. The vitality and challenge of the World Ethos Project lies first and foremost in generating the wanting, not in defining the oughts.

Fromm takes great pains, however, in *To Have or to Be*, to describe the ways in which modern 'capitalism' actively sabotages this love project. By reducing the individual to her exchange value on the 'personality market', capitalism risks alienating the individual from her own self and her own life, making it impossible to achieve K ung's *Grundvertrauen* or *Lebensvertrauen* (Basic Trust in life or reality), and by extension, making it impossible for her to care deeply about those beyond herself:

Since the person stuck on the personality market does not have a deep attachment to herself or others, nothing really affects her, not because she is selfish as such, but because her relationship with herself and others is so thin. This perhaps also explains why such individuals tend not to worry about nuclear or ecological catastrophe even when confronted with the facts. That they have no fear for themselves might perhaps be explained in terms of virtues like courage and selflessness; their attitude to the destinies of their children and grandchildren, however, excludes such an interpretation. Their cavalier attitude to such matters is a result of a lack of emotional attachment, even to those nearest and dearest to them. In reality, no one is close to the person trapped on the personality market, least of all her own self.

¹⁹⁶ Erich Fromm, *Die Kunst des Liebens*, (M nchen: dtv, 1995 (1956)), pp. 201-202.

The puzzling question why people today buy and consume so readily but set so little store by what they acquire can most convincingly be answered in these terms. The lack of attachment extends to inanimate objects. The prestige and comfort which certain objects bring may indeed in a certain sense be valued, but not the things themselves. They are utterly exchangeable, just like friends and even lovers, because no deeper attachment to them exists.¹⁹⁷

Fromm's further theorising on modernity's fetishisation of reason at the expense of emotional attachment to one's own life has largely been borne out by recent neuroscience; emotional engagement and rational activity are extremely difficult to combine in the same instant, while the long-term stress of management, research and other logistical tasks may even lead to the physical atrophy of empathy modules in the brain.¹⁹⁸ No less a mind than Charles Darwin is singled out by Fromm as a victim of this alienation:

[Darwin] writes in his autobiography that he found great enjoyment in music, poetry, and painting until the age of 30, and then for many years lost his taste for these pursuits: 'My mind seems to have turned into a kind of machine, filtering general laws out of giant samples of data. The loss of these hobbies represents a net loss of happiness which possibly harms the intellect and quite probably the moral substance of character, for it weakens the emotional side of our nature.'¹⁹⁹

The greatest scientists, however, from Darwin himself to Einstein, Heisenberg and others, succeeded in maintaining 'an engagement with philosophical and religious questions' despite their other daily responsibilities. Education must do more to lead ordinary people out of the dangerous state of emotional retardation in which (in the Marxist language popular in Fromm's day) 'the individual is alienated from her work, her self, and her fellow human beings':

The dominance of cerebral, manipulative thinking advances parallel with an atrophy of the world of feeling. Since this world is not cultivated and not needed, but is rather [seen as] an obstacle to optimal functioning, the emotional lives of the individuals confined to it remains stunted, locked in a stage of perennial childhood. The result is that those trapped in the 'personality market' are noticeably naïve in matters of the heart. They often fall prey to 'emotional types' themselves, but in their naïveté fail to distinguish between real spiritual leaders and charlatans. This

¹⁹⁷ Erich Fromm, *Haben oder Sein: Die seelischen Grundlagen einer neuen Gesellschaft*, (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1976), p. 146.

¹⁹⁸ See Jerry Useem, 'Power Causes Brain Damage', <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/07/power-causes-brain-damage/528711/>, July/August 2017 (accessed 19/8/2017). I am also thankful to fellow Kiwi Gareth Craze for his outstanding paper on 'Corporate Social Responsibility and Dehumanisation' given at the *Philosophy of Management Conference* at Webster University, St. Louis, on 14/7/2017, in which he explored some of the latest neuroscientific data on the relationship between empathy and the exercise of rationality and its implications for management philosophy.

¹⁹⁹ Fromm, *Haben oder Sein*, p. 147.

perhaps explains why so many hucksters today enjoy such success with their books of self-help spirituality and pseudo-religion; it may also explain why politicians who succeed in expressing strong emotions are capable of exerting such influence over the prisoners of the 'personality market', and why they struggle to tell the difference between the truly pious and the public relations product who merely fakes it.²⁰⁰

Just as Marx intended his now-famous remark about religion as an 'opium of the people' as an invitation to 'break the chain and cull the living flower', so too does Fromm proclaim a 'humanistic protest' against the state of emotional retardation made pervasive by the 'personality market' of late capitalism. While Küng himself was no card-carrying socialist, Fromm's description of a certain strand of mid-century socialist humanism could be seen almost word for word as a forerunner to Küng's *Projekt Weltethos*:

[This] protest from the Left can be described as *radical humanism*, even if it was expressed in both theistic and nontheistic language in different contexts. [Such] Socialists believed that economic development was unstoppable, that one could not hope to return to earlier forms of social organisation, and that the only viable option was to press forward with the construction of a new society in which individual human beings were liberated from alienation, slavery to machines and a destiny of dehumanisation. [Such] Socialism represented a synthesis of the religious tradition of the Middle Ages with the scientific thinking of the Renaissance and its new attitude to political engagement. Like Buddhism, it was a 'religious' mass movement which, even if it used a share of profane and atheistic language, aimed at freeing human beings from selfishness and greed.²⁰¹

Küng's *Weltethos*, while obviously and avowedly less than a comprehensive 'religious' doctrine for the whole world, nevertheless contains a strong thrust of this humanism, according to which, in Fromm's formulation, 'the goal of history [is seen as] making it possible for human beings to devote themselves to the study of wisdom and the understanding of God, and to free themselves from [the desire for] power and luxury'.²⁰² As well as Marx himself (who 'proceeded from economic categories of thought to "religious", psychological and anthropological themes' and, like Fromm, regarded 'having and being as two different forms of human existence'²⁰³), so too is the theologian Albert Schweitzer, with his concept of 'reverence for life' (*Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben*), engaged by Fromm as an ally in the mid-century humanistic struggle against modern alienation.²⁰⁴ Hans Küng, with his concept of Basic Trust in life

²⁰⁰ Fromm, *Haben oder Sein*, p. 147.

²⁰¹ Fromm, *Haben oder Sein*, p. 151.

²⁰² Fromm, *Haben oder Sein*, p. 152.

²⁰³ Fromm, *Haben oder Sein*, p. 153.

²⁰⁴ Fromm, *Haben oder Sein*, p. 158.

(*Lebensvertrauen* or *Grundvertrauen*), is the natural 21st-century heir to this tradition.²⁰⁵

Concluding Remarks: A World Ethos and 'Spiritual Humanism(s)'

Along the lines of Fromm's 'humanistic protest', Tu Weiming has defended the idea of 'spiritual humanism' (in Chinese, *jingshen renwenzhuyi*) as an extension of Küng's *Weltethos* idea for a 21st-century global audience keen to transcend the 'thin' Western contractarianism which is perceived - as this book endeavours to show, partly fairly - as having been attached to the 'Global Ethic' initiative. This paradigm shift 'from Global Ethic to World Ethos' is, as the title suggests, the central theme of this book; Tu Weiming's 'spiritual humanism' will take centre stage, as Küng's *Grundvertrauen* has done here, in my *next* book, which I look forward to beginning in 2018. Broader questions concerning the role of psychology and the social sciences in the future of the World Ethos project, however, need to be addressed here, and Fromm is a good, if outdated, entry point for doing so.

Like Fromm himself, Küng is committed to a certain equanimity regarding the results of scientific research: the whole idea of Basic Trust in life implies trusting the results of free empirical and intellectual inquiry. Also like Fromm, however, Küng aimed at more than mere description in his own work: the descriptive fact that all the world's major religions and spiritual traditions contain traces of a common *ethos* is secondary to the normative imperative to improve the practice of these traditions, both internally and in their external relations with other traditions in the context of 21st-century globalisation. Out of this scrum of civilisations, a new common humanism or common bandwidth of friendly sister humanisms unitable under the banner of a World Ethos may or may not emerge; efforts must be made, however, to ensure that it does. Küng's *Weltethos* project is, like Fromm's 'humanistic protest' and Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto*, an attempt to influence history rather than merely to describe it. Fromm's language may be dated, and decades of subsequent empirical research may have either confirmed or cast doubt on many of Fromm's specific empirical claims, but as with those of Freud before him, 'whatever one might think of the particular empirical claims that Freud advanced – notions such as the Oedipus complex, the mechanisms of defence, and the theory of dreaming'²⁰⁶ – there is, in the words of David Livingstone Smith, 'another, relatively unrecognised aspect' of Fromm's thinking. While Freud bravely challenged the prevalent 'mind-body dualism' of his day, Fromm, like Hans Küng himself, challenged the need for anti-humanistic separatisms of all kinds, arguing instead for a humanistic unity, by definition pluralistic and flexible rather than dogmatic and preachy in its use of language, but at the same time unmistakably anti-relativistic, a new, globalised cultural order in which attachment, reverence and trust in life would triumph over alienation, indifference and fear of life.

As Fromm's title in *The Art of Loving* suggests, however, this is a humanistic and aesthetic challenge, not primarily a scientific one: a scientific spirit of open and

²⁰⁵ See the first chapter of Hans Küng, *Was ich glaube (What I Believe)*, (München: Piper, 2010) as well as the first chapter of the present volume for an extended discussion of Küng's concept of *Lebensvertrauen*.

²⁰⁶ David Livingstone Smith, 'Freud the Philosopher', <https://aeon.co/essays/from-philosophy-to-psychoanalysis-a-classic-freudian-move>, 10/8/2017 (accessed 19/8/2017).

honest empirical inquiry is always necessary, but it is not sufficient to love well. Far from being the passive application of a scientific theory, Fromm's ideal of a *vita activa*, in which a 'biophilic' attachment to life as a whole is gradually born out of attachments to concrete individuals, is an extension of an existing *ethos* within oneself to one's everyday productive activities. Humanistically cultivating this *ethos* in the first place - through narrative, music, the power of positive example, parental generosity and other such intangibles - is infinitely more important and challenging than scientifically explaining its features or the purported sociological causes of its absence. As Louis Armstrong put it when asked by a journalist to define what jazz was: 'If you have to ask, you'll never know.'