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Review E. Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*

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Is cruelty an innate drive, as the instinctivists say, or solely a matter of conditioning, as the behaviorists say? Neither, writes Erich Fromm, who presents an impressive review of research from many disciplines to show that neither model does justice to the complex reality of human aggressive behavior. He goes on to offer his own comprehensive typology of aggressive tendencies, exploring and illustrating each type and subtype in detail.

The first target of Fromm's searching critique is the thesis of Konrad Lorenz, widely popularized in the writings of Robert Ardrey and Desmond Morris, that war, crime, personal quarrels, and all manner of destructive and cruel behavior are the expression of a phylogenetically programmed instinct in man. Lorenz, like Freud, views aggression in hydraulic terms, as an ever-flowing inner fountain of energy or excitation seeking release. Suppression is difficult, even unhealthy. Lorenz sees the aggressive impulse as serving life because it promotes survival; Freud calls it the death instinct.

Fromm surveys the research literature on aggression in the fields of neurophysiology, animal psychology, paleontology, and anthropology for evidence concerning this and other instinctivistic theories. He finds that the research data do not support the hypothesis that man is endowed with a spontaneous and self-propelling aggressive drive. The data do support, for humans and other mammals, a model of aggressive behavior as a defensive response to any kind of threat to the survival (or vital interests) of the organism. Evidence in hand, Fromm also challenges some widely held notions regarding territorialism, crowding, predatory aggression, etc. as factors in human aggression.

Fromm's second target is neobehaviorism, at first thought an unlikely object of attack, since behaviorists deny the existence of any innate patterns of behavior. But behaviorists also ignore feelings, meanings, and other subjective phenomena, declaring them to be irrelevant to a scientific psychology. And Fromm does believe that there are certain subjective needs that grow out of the „human condition.“ In carefully reasoned critiques of the obedience experiments of Stanley Milgram and the „prison“ experiments of Solly Zuckerman, he attempts to show that attention to the subjective dimension greatly increases our understanding of what occurred.

Fromm sees human aggressive motivation as falling into two fundamental types: benign aggression and malignant aggression. Benign aggression expresses an organic drive; malignant aggression fulfills a character need. Except for a few types of „accidental aggression,“ Fromm's subtypes of benign aggression are variations of „defensive aggression.“



Phylogenetically determined neuron structures facilitate this pattern of response to threat, although humans, with difficulty, can learn to respond otherwise. Though defensive aggression is ordinarily biologically adaptive, its incidence is many times greater in man than in other animals. The reason for this is that man's capacity to concern himself with the future and to imagine dangers real and unreal multiplies man's readiness to perceive threat.

Fromm sees malignant aggression (cruelty and destructiveness) as uniquely human—but not as panhuman. It represents one kind of adaptation to human psychic needs. Man is set apart biologically from all other animals, Fromm argues, by the conjunction of minimal instinctive determination of behavior and maximal brain development. The combination of self-awareness and deprivation of instinctual guidelines to behavior creates some psychic needs unique to man. These include, for example, the need for a frame of orientation, a pattern of relatedness, a sense of unity within and with the outside world, and a sense of effectiveness. A substitute for the missing instincts is required if man is to be able to act effectively. The development of character provides the needed substitute for structuring human energy (or motivation). Various character types represent different ways of adapting to universal human psychic needs and making sense of life. The quality of every emotion, including impulses to aggression, is shaped by character. The sadistic character and the necrophilic character are two types of character structure that tend to generate impulses to cruel and destructive behavior. Fromm illustrates these types with psychobiographies of Stalin, Himmler, and Hitler. Fromm considers malignant aggression to be much the greater threat to mankind. This view seems colored by Fromm's greater interest in character-determined aggression, when one notes that he declares most wars to be the expression of „instrumental aggression,“ a subtype of benign aggression.

This book should not be regarded as a definitive study of the causes of aggression. It is a wide-ranging analysis of *motivation* to aggression. There is little attention to the role of social control mechanisms, levels of consensus, law, or other factors on the level of the social system. Fromm discusses social factors extensively, but primarily with reference to the creation of varying types of „social character,“ which in turn produce varying types of impulses to aggression. He concedes that social character does not determine behavior; it only determines what behavior the individual would prefer. The „reality principle“ (including sociological realities) interacts with character to determine behavior.

Fromm is aware that many regard his general approach as „subjectively speculative.“ It is indeed, and he has not rid himself of many of the methodological weaknesses that have plagued psychoanalytic research. Because of these weaknesses, many sociologists, in search of social psychological underpinnings, have fallen back on the rather spare principles developed by the behaviorists. But perhaps it is well for us to be reminded periodically by this sophisticated and scholarly observer of the human scene that there is more to the human endeavor—specifically, to human motivation—than is dreamt of in the laboratories of the behaviorists. Triviality of conclusions can be the price paid for accuracy if our models are pared down to fit the safest methodology. Even if he falls short of establishing the answers, Fromm keeps alive questions about the nature of human nature that are vital to an adequate social psychology.