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Review Fromm, E.: The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness (1973a, English)

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Fromm's book is offered as a definitive statement on the origins of the human appetite for cruelty and destruction. The author notes that six years ago, when he envisioned the book as the first volume of a comprehensive work on psychoanalytic theory, he focused on this topic because "aside from being one of the fundamental theoretical problems in psychoanalysis, the wave of destructiveness engulfing the world makes it also one of the most practically relevant ones. [p. xi]." The result is an impressively long and wide-ranging analysis of the problem in which Fromm regrettably fails to make good on his promise to provide us with a substantial new understanding of the morbid human passion for death and destruction.

In the first third of the book, Fromm reargues the old debate on nature versus nurture (or instinct versus behaviorism) and decides (as he has often done in previous works) in favor of a third position—his own brand of existentialism, in which he views humans as motivated by character-rooted passions that evolve from individual life experiences and are influenced to a large degree by the particular social system in which the individual is enmeshed.

From this vantage point, Fromm rejects appetitive instinct theories of aggression, such as the Freudian death instinct or Lorentz's phylogenetically programmed aggressive behavior, in which aggressive energy inevitably accumulates to the point of explosive discharge unless drained off beforehand by appropriate stimuli. Fromm insists (as most contemporary psychoanalysts probably would) that normal aggressive behavior in humans occurs only as a response to frustration. He points out the Darwinian survival value of this inherited instinctual response that man shares with other species in the animal kingdom. And it is at this point that he arrives at his main thesis: beyond this defensive or "benign" aggression, there is a second kind of aggression, found only among humans, that he labels "malignant aggression." This kind of aggression leads man to kill or torture for no apparent reason, other than the satisfaction he derives from the pure act of destruction. In contrast to the instinctually based defensive aggression, Fromm argues, malignant aggression is rooted in the human character, one of the passions like love, ambition, and greed.

Fromm identifies two kinds of malignant aggression: sadism and necrophilia. He then proposes generalizing the familiar concept of sadism to include nonsexual acts of mental or physical cruelty in addition to the sexual perversion. For example, he points out that Stalin had the sadistic habit of assuring people they were safe when he had already given the order for their arrest. Fromm's main point about sadism is that its essence is the thirst for control: "The core of sadism, common to all its manifestations, is the passion to have absolute and unrestricted control over a living being [p. 288]."



The second form of malignant aggression, necrophilia, is less familiar. Again, Fromm proposes that the concept be generalized beyond the sexual perversion to include “the passionate attraction to all that is dead, decayed, putrid, sickly; it is the passion to transform that which is alive into something unalive; to destroy for the sake of destruction; the exclusive interest in all that is purely mechanical. It is the passion to tear apart living structures [p. 332].”

Whereas the sadistic character's interests fall short of killing his victim (he wants to enslave, with the infliction of unbearable pain as the ultimate proof of his absolute power), the necrophilic character's primary interest is death and destruction. One obvious example of this behavior is the methodical mass murder of Jews in the Nazi gas chambers. A less obvious manifestation of necrophilia, according to Fromm, is seen in the impact of technological society. The dehumanizing effects of living in a “megamachine” society (à la Lewis Mumford) devoted to mechanized progress and regimented consumption leads to what Fromm calls the “cybernetic man.” This kind of man shows no overt interest in human corpses and other tangible reminders of death; his necrophilia is revealed in his alienation from spontaneous human feeling, his total absorption in the intellectual world of things, and his identification with the nonliving machines that control him.

Fromm uses extensive descriptive material—examples from case histories as well as detailed biographical studies—to delineate his conceptions of the sadistic necrophilic characters for the reader. He chooses Heinrich Himmler as his prime example of the sadistic character and provides us with an engrossing 25-page study of Himmler's personal life and character traits. However, as the necrophilic character par excellence Fromm points to Adolf Hitler and devotes 64 pages to uncovering the clues to features of Hitler's character that can be discerned from reading the many available sources of biographical information.

Fromm has gone to great effort to pull together a wide variety of clinical data of this kind to illustrate his ideas about sadism and necrophilia, and these pages are the most rewarding in the book. In contrast, his efforts to explain what is of greatest interest about these ideas to practicing psychoanalysts are disappointing. He devotes surprisingly little space to the possible origins of these two malignant character structures in the psychosexual (Fromm would prefer psychosocial) development of the human psyche. The closest he comes to such a formulation are some brief remarks in which he accepts Freud's view that sadism has its origins in the anal period of development and observes that the sadistic character “occurs in those people who are more hostile and more narcissistic than the average hoarding (anal) character [p. 348].” He then suggests that the necrophilic character occurs when the anal personality is combined with a still greater degree of hostility and narcissism, concluding that the necrophile is the most malignant form of the anal character.

Fromm himself admits, however, that this conclusion does not fit the cybernetic man form of necrophilia (presumably the most numerous type found in modern society). The cybernetic man's most prominent features are a deep sense of alienation and lack of affect. Fromm ends the discussion by noting the striking similarities between his cybernetic man and the schizophrenic.

However, he questions whether there is not a difference between the two because, although he views the cybernetic necrophile as acting in destructive ways, he points out that adult



schizophrenics rarely become actually violent or destructive.

The reader's curiosity is left unsatisfied about the origins of both character structures. Fromm himself is unclear about whether the necrophilic character is primarily a product of the anal period or of the earlier oral period that gives rise to schizophrenia.

I would venture to clarify this confusion by suggesting that in his necrophilic character, Fromm has simply rediscovered the character of Narcissus (or the narcissistic character). Spotnitz pointed out that the myth of Narcissus is best explained by attributing Narcissus' withdrawal and self-preoccupation to defenses against murderous rage toward the object world.¹ Thus Spotnitz suggests that schizophrenia, the most severe of the narcissistic disorders, can be understood as a defense against intense infantile rage in which the rage is turned against the self, resulting in destruction of the individual's own ego and the appearance of the ego-fragmented behavior characteristic of schizophrenia.

Analysis of schizophrenic patients, in my own experience, invariably reveals the presence of this central motivating core of murderous feelings and interest in death and destruction.² The anal character wants to control, the narcissistic character wants to murder; and just as the anal character becomes the primary victim of his own powerful urges, so it is with the narcissist.

If we are willing to recognize this motivating force underlying the narcissistic disorders (an observation apparently not widely appreciated in analytic circles), then Fromm's necrophilic character clearly belongs in the realm of narcissism (the early oral period of development) rather than in the realm of anality.

A remaining question is whether the necrophilic character (whom Fromm envisions as a nonpsychotic functioning member of the community) actually differs in any essential way from the familiar schizoid character. Although Fromm notes many similarities, he questions whether the schizoid is really destructive to others. Based on our premise that the schizoid is indeed filled with extremely strong impulses to destroy, which are held in check only by equally strong defenses, we would expect that because no psychological defense is ever completely successful, careful analysis will always show that the relations schizoids do have with others reveal many destructive actions similar to those Fromm sees in necrophilics. Thus, using Fromm's framework, we might label the schizoid a well-defended necrophilic. But from the opposite point of view, Fromm's necrophilic can be viewed as a too loosely defended schizoid.

In summary, my reaction to *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* is that although Fromm did not reach the conclusion himself, the material he presents reinforces the thesis that the most horrifying acts of human brutality and the most deepseated and bizarre disturbances in human behavior share a common origin in the earliest months of human development.

¹ Spotnitz, H. *Modern Psychoanalysis of the Schizophrenic Patient*. N. Y. Grune & Stratton. 1969.

² Davis, H. L., Short-term psychoanalytic Therapy with Hospitalized Schizophrenics. *Psychoanal. Rev.* 52 (4), 1965, pp. 422-448.