



## Erich Fromm - Humanist of the Year -1966

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Not knowing Erich Fromm personally nor having been intimately acquainted with his career over the years, I decided to prepare for these remarks by reading through a few of his books. It was a thought-provoking experience. One becomes deeply immersed in the humanist attitude as the author highlights the dignity of individual man, stresses the roles of faith and reason, focuses upon -psychoanalysis, capitalism and socialism, war and peace. Hundreds of thousands of people must have been influenced by Dr. Fromm. For many years he has been sharing his ideas, as a professor of psychology and psychoanalysis, through articles and talks and more than a dozen books. I should say that he is one of the Humanists of the Years.

Fromm is not merely a thorough-going humanist. He has an inexorable way of applying his views, though he avoids becoming dogmatic. When, for instance, as in *The Sane Society* and since, he stresses that the problem of the twentieth century is „that man is dead,“ he is most persuasive. While the nineteenth century was concerned that „God is dead,“ our problem today, Fromm maintains, is man's alienation. He drives home the notion that western capitalism and authoritarian communism both threaten to turn man into a robot. He sees humanistic communitarian socialism as man's only salvation.

The force of his ideas and their repetition may persuade some readers that all of Fromm's conclusions follow inevitably from the humanist position. I mention this matter not to criticize our honored fellow humanist, but to call attention to the effectiveness of his exposition. His thorough application of humanistic values, after

all, is more to be cited than censored.

Humanists, while sharing basic views, also differ in many ways. Psychological, sociological, and political differences are readily found. As in other groups and society as a whole, these differences are unavoidable and valuable. Fromm's persistent pursuit of the humanist position makes one wonder though. Are all our differences fully compatible with the principles we espouse? With careful thought, might we discover that some are less consistent with humanism than others?

Another train of thought I had in reading Dr. Fromm's books has to do with my training and work as a psychoanalyst. Thinking back fifteen to twenty years, I realize that I learned rather little about the rich ideas of the man we are recognizing today. I heard about his deviating from Freud. But, as I remember it, little effort was made to expose psychoanalytic candidates to the humanist point of view as such, or to study in depth the contributions of colleagues like Erich Fromm. There was a time in psychoanalysis, especially in the early years of the „psychoanalytic movement,“ when an attitude akin to religious fervor and dogma existed and seemed necessary to sustain the pioneering psychoanalysts. Today, unfortunately, some remnants of this attitude still exist.

Fromm disagrees with Freud's inference that aggressive behavior stems from a basic death instinct. He closely examines aspects of the Oedipus Complex and suggests that Freud overemphasized the importance of sexual rivalry between son and father for the love of the mother. He stresses in general that the basic drives are not as important as Freud portrayed



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them. I happen to agree with some of Fromm's differences from Freud and not with others. But I believe they all are worthy of careful consideration. Equally important, I think, is the fact that Erich Fromm has been pointing out for years the importance of values and ethics, and their relevance for the psychoanalyst. This is something which organized psychoanalysis has largely ignored even to this day.

Erich Fromm has accomplished, I believe, what only few men have. He has reached a large audience and has communicated effectively the nontheistic humanist ideal. In so doing, he has made this often chaotic world of ours a more hopeful place in which to live. Dr. Fromm has increased the likelihood that

people will accept, understand and trust one another, that they will recognize the positive and constructive potential within every person, that they will be guided by rational thinking rather than by magic and superstition. He has, above all, spoken for the right to be oneself, to be free of fear, to realize one's capacity for critical thought and one's individuality in the face of pressures for conformity. He has maintained that men can be free, and if determined enough, can build humanistic views and values into the social institutions of our society. For this valuable contribution Dr. Fromm is deservedly recognized by the American Humanist Association as Humanist of the Year.