The Civilized Roots of Human Destructiveness

Erich Fromm


Reviewed by Morton Deutsch

Erich Fromm, noted psychoanalyst, social philosopher, and author, has been on the faculty of the National University of Mexico Medical School for over 20 years. A native of Frankfurt, Germany, Fromm is a Ph.D. of the University of Heidelberg. He has been Chairman of the faculty of William Alanson White Institute of Psychiatry since 1947, and he has been a Visiting Professor at Columbia University, Yale University, and Michigan State University, and he adored the Terry Lectures at Yale during 1940-41. Fromm has written more than 20 books, including Escape From Freedom, The Sane Society, The Revolution of Hope, and The Crisis of Psychoanalysis.

Revewer Morton Deutsch is Professor of Psychology at Teachers College, Columbia University. He is a Ph.D. of the University of Chicago, and he holds a certificate in psychoanalytic from the Post-Graduate Center in Clinical Psychology. He is a member of the Board of "The Civilized Roots of Human Destructiveness - a review essay on human destructive behavior." (Contemporary Psychology, 1975, Vol. 20, No. 2.

This rich, thoughtful book is a major contribution to the understanding of human destructive behavior. The book presents an important new perspective on the nature of human self-destruction and its implications for social change.

Fromm's central concern is with "human aggression". It is important to recognize that Fromm has seemingly ignored the concept of aggression as it is defined in psychology and social science. However, Fromm's analysis is based on a more fundamental understanding of human nature and its potential for self-destruction.

Fromm suggests that human aggression is not merely an expression of frustration or anger, but a more complex and subtle process. It is a means of coping with the sense of isolation and alienation that characterizes modern society. Fromm argues that this sense of isolation and alienation is a product of the modern industrial society, which has created a world of superficial relationships and material success. In this world, people feel hungry for something more, something beyond mere possessions and wealth. This hunger is a source of frustration and anger, which is the basis of human aggression.

Fromm's analysis is based on a deep understanding of human nature and its potential for self-destruction. It is a call to action, urging us to recognize the sources of human aggression and to work towards creating a more humane and just world.
ness, greed, narcissism, and inversions-ness. The distinction between biophilia and necrophilia is meant by Fromm to relate to Freud's distinction between life and death instincts. Freud gave these tendencies equal weight and considered both to be biologically given. Fromm, on the other hand, considers biophilia as the biologically normal impulse and necrophilia as representing a psychic crippling—a much less pessimistic view than Freud's. (In an appendix, Fromm has an excellent historical review and critique of Freud's theory of life and death instincts.)

The two subtypes of the "life-sabotaging" syndrome, the sadistic and the necrophilous characters, are dealt with extensively. The passion of the sadistic character is to dominate and control, but not necessarily to destroy. In contrast, the necrophilous character has a "passionate attraction to all that is dead, decayed, putrid, stinking; it is the passion to transform that which is alive into something unloving; to destroy for the sake of destruction; the exclusive interest in all that is purely mechanical."

Other attributes of the necrophilous include: negation of the past, a dislike for bright colors, an affinity for dead things, frequent use of words referring to destruction and decay, and interest in the machine.

In a strange reversal, Fromm states that modern "mechanicized, cynical" man does not have many of these features of the malignant sadistic character. Necrophilia is manifested primarily in the transformation of all life into things; the lifeless world of total technification. This is a different form of the world of death and decay. The low-grade, socially-patterned, schizophrenic process characteristic of modern cybernetic man is evidenced more dramatically in the "mechanized" than in individual insanity; modern technological society with its pollution, drug addiction, and preoccupation, with war stands composed of manifesting and breeding necrophilia.

In addition to his analysis of the social roots of modern necrophilia, Fromm offers the hypothesis that the individual roots of the development of necrophilous character lie in a "malignant incestuousness," in which the child never breaks through the shell of autistic self-sufficiency to form affective bonds with the mother. His concluding chapter is an expository case history of Hitler as an illustration of necrophilia. Although the case history is fascinating, Fromm never satisfactorily answers the question he raises after describing Hitler's parents: "How can we explain that these two well-meaning, stable, very normal, and certainly not destructive people gave birth to the future "leader," Adolf Hitler?"

Neither the characteristic nor the social analysis that Fromm offers in this book provide new or satisfactory answers to the understanding of prevention of human destructiveness. The sadistic and necrophilous character types are variants of the anal and sadistic characters that have been discussed in the psychoanalytic literature in somewhat different terminology. Frequently, Fromm's characteristicological observations have more the quality of moral judgments than of scientific descriptions. Fromm has not identified the familial or psycho-social circumstances that give rise to these types except in the most general way, nor has he identified the individual and social conditions that permit people with such characters to express openly their destructive potential or that enable them to have positive influence. His social analysis does not go much beyond asserting, in several different ways, that destructiveness and also defensive aggression can be reduced to a minimum only if the whole system (i.e., a society based on exploitive control) as it has existed during the last 6,000 years of history can be replaced by a fundamentally different one.

Fromm's humanistic view of human civilization does not begin to explain the great variations in destructive ness to be found among different civilizations and to be found at different periods in the history of such groups. Nor do his characterological types help to explain these great variations. Perversely, Fromm's position suffers almost as much from the basic inability to explain variations in human destructiveness as the instinctual viewpoint, Twenty Years of Work on Form Perception

Irvin Rock

Rock is Professor in the Institute for Cognitive Studies, Rutgers University at Newark. He earned his Ph.D. from the New School for Social Research and has taught on the faculties of the New School for Social Research and of Yeshiva University. Rock's research deals with perception, learning, and memory processes. He is also author of The Nature of Perceptual Adaptation and An Introduction to Perception.

Hans Wallach, the reviewer, is Professor of Psychology at Swarthmore College. He is a Ph.D. of the University of Berlin. Wallach also served as the faculty of the New School for Social Research. His fields of interest are visual and auditory space perception.

This book treats what has been for a long time a perplexing problem. It presents a theory of high explanatory power based on few assumptions. Having been interested in the problem for many years, I find it a remarkable achievement.

More than 20 years ago, Rock started his work on the effect of orientation on perceived shape by asking: 'What happens when a not too complex, familiar figure is viewed with the observer's head in horizontal position so that the figure's retinal image is turned by nearly 90°?'