



Fromm's Concept of Biophilia

Marianne Horney Eckardt

Paper presented at the 34th Winter-Meeting of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis, December 9, 1990, in San Antonio/Texas in Commemoration of Erich Fromm's 90th Birthday. First published in *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 20 (No 2, 1992), pp. 233-240 and reprinted in *Vom Umgang mit dem Fremden* (Dealing with the Alien). Jahrbuch der Internationalen Erich-Fromm-Gesellschaft, Münster, Vol. 5 (LIT Verlag) 1994, pp. 101-109.

Copyright © 1992 and 2009 by Dr. Marianne Horney Eckardt, 3066-A Via Serena South, Laguno Hills, Ca 92653, USA; E-Mail: meck[at-symbol]fea.net.

The words biophilia and necrophilia do not invite or appeal. They bring to mind diseases like hemophilia and carry an aura of the weighty claim of scientific authority. They are alienated words. Biophilia means, of course, love of life. For Fromm biophilia is the essence of humanitarian ethics, which is the central theme of every one of his books. He believes that a productive, creative, caring attitude toward life is crucial to our notion of the mental health of ourselves, our patients, and mankind, if it is to survive. Since Fromm devoted his life to fighting any form of alienation, I was curious about the when and wherefore of his adopting these terms. He explains his choice of the term necrophilia and his explanation illuminates. Biophilia corresponds to necrophilia as its opposite. Fromm (1973) says that the term necrophilous was first used by the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno in 1936 when he responded to a speech made by General Milan Astray, whose motto was „Viva la muerte” („Long live death”). Unamuno replied: „Just now I heard a necrophilous and senseless cry: 'Long live death!'... It pains me that General Milan Astray should dictate the pattern of mass psychology. A cripple who lacks the spiritual greatness of a Cervantes is wont to seek ominous relief in causing mutilation around him” (p. 331). This story and thus the word had profound meaning for Fromm. It referred to a character trait which was psychodynamically motivated in a socio-political con-

frontation between brute force and et courageous spiritual leader. There is no alienation in Fromm's adoption of the term, which he did in 1961.

Fromm rarely wrote in the conventional style of psychoanalysis, and he rarely spelled out the relevance of his writing to psychoanalysts. But relevance is everywhere. I will place his concerns with humanitarian ethics in the context of the history of psychoanalytic interest in moral values in order to highlight his beliefs. The relationship of moral values and neuroses has been an issue of discomfort in the history of psychoanalysis. Freud's superego was related to the biological force of the id and specified taboos on murder and incest, but there was little else that one could construe as broader ethics.

Heinz Hartmann (1960) first confronted the issues in his book *Psychoanalysis and Moral Values*, a thoughtful book, in which he affirmed the separate realms of psychoanalysis and moral issues, and that neurosis is not a „moral problem.” Here are a few of his key phrases: „You know how carefully we avoid, in analysis, imposing ethical demands on our patients” (p. 92). „Analysis is as little a never failing key to morality as it is, as Freud was the first to remind us, a reliable key to happiness” (p. 87). „Analysis makes for unity, but not necessarily for goodness” (p. 87). „Acting in self-interest is often considered more healthy, more rational, more legitimate -- but psychoanalysis is



not in a position to decide these questions” (p. 76) . „The recognition of one’s authentic values and their distinction from those which are not authentic is not infrequently sharpened in the course of analysis. This will not change a ‘bad’ person into a ‘good’ person, or only rarely. What it means is that the codes can become less distorted, often less one-sided expressions of the moral aspects of the personality” (p. 92).

The neo-Freudians took this problem much more seriously. For them neurosis was indeed a moral problem. This was a radical shift, a shift as important as their abandonment of the libido theory. Neurotic forces cause self-alienation and thus interfere with productivity, creativity, and relationships to others. Karen Horney’s first chapter in her last book, *Neurosis and Human Growth* (1950), is called „A Morality of Evolution.” Neurotic forces, according to her, interfere with man’s nature given strivings for self-realization. Horney wrote: „You need not, and in fact cannot, teach an acorn to grow into an oak tree, but when given a chance, its intrinsic potentialities will develop. Similarly, the human individual, given a chance, tends to develop his particular human potentialities. He will develop then the unique alive forces of his real self: the clarity and depth of his own feelings, thoughts, wishes, interests; the ability to tap his own resources; the strength of his will power; the special capacities or gifts he may have; the faculty to express himself, and to relate himself to others with his spontaneous feelings” (p. 17). Horney, with her usual clarity, here describes the mental health norm which became widely accepted, a norm which not only measured what could be, but also what „was not given a chance,” meaning the interplay between environment, anxiety, and neurotic defensive strategies which interfered with natural growth. These ideal norms helped to create the widely accepted notion that being neurotic was being bad or being less of a human being, and not being neurotic was equated with health and integrity.

Another persuasive proponent of this trend was Andrea Angyal (1965), who described in his book *Neurosis and Treatment - A Holistic Theory* his theory of the dual organization of personality: an overall healthy one and one we call neurotic. The neurotic one bears the imprint of

its origin in the state of isolation and anxiety, and the world of the healthy feels like home. It is rich in opportunities, lawfully ordered, and meaningfully related to the person.

The time of the 1940’s and 1950’s were the years of the greatest idealism about the role of psychoanalysis as the savior of mankind. Money-Kryle (1961), an associate of Melanie Klein’s, in his book *Man’s Picture of His World*, speaks of the hope that, if carried out on a scale wide and deep enough, psychoanalysis could affect the world as a whole and point towards a happier future of mankind.

In spite of differences, Freudians and neo-Freudians share the idea that moral issues are not directly their concern or responsibility. Freudians feel their therapeutic realm is distinct from such issues and neo-Freudians rely on nature’s inherent positive forces. Fromm, though a co-builder of the neo-Freudian position, arrived at a different philosophy. Man has the potentiality for good and evil, but evil is not just a by-product of psychopathology. Our notions of mental health are not just a measure of disease, but a mixture of neurotic Psychopathology and our beliefs in our Western ethics. Fromm accepted the challenge, which recently was most succinctly expressed by Stephen Jay Gould (1987) when he wrote of our biased hope to view evolution as inherently progressive; that is, to believe that good design or harmony of the system is entailed in the laws of nature. Gould writes: „We are left with two choices in reinterpreting our oldest hope that moral messages might be extracted from nature: Either the messages are there and they are terrible ... or moral messages cannot be derived from nature’s facts. The ethical standards of human life are not written upon the heavens or etched into a blade of grass. These are human concepts, fit only for human definitions and human struggles. Thus we need humanists of all stripes, for science does not touch these deepest questions” (p. 146).

Fromm is such a humanist. It is important to be very clear about Fromm’s belief about the essence of man. He believes that man is the product of natural evolution; that he is part of nature and yet transcends it, being endowed with reason and self-awareness. He believes that man’s essence is ascertainable. However, this essence is



not a substance which characterizes man at all times of history. The essence of man consists in the mentioned contradiction inherent in his existence, and this existence forces him to react in order to find a solution. Man has to answer this question every moment of his life. Man has to recognize that there is no absolute answer he can receive that he must be active in his struggle for a solution. Man, of course, finds myriads of solutions, but it is Fromm's style to polarize for emphasis. Fromm points to a regressive and a progressive solution, solutions which reflect Fromm's passionate belief in the importance of humanistic ethics. Fromm believes there are right and wrong turns at a fork in the road. His books are all written in order to make people aware of existing alternatives and their consequences.

Fromm (1962) believes that no one can save his fellow man by making a choice for him. „All that one man can do,” he writes, „is to show him the alternatives truthfully and lovingly, yet without any sentimentality or illusion. Confrontation with the true alternatives may awaken all the hidden energies in a person and enable him to choose life. No one else can breathe life into him” (p. 176).

The phrase „All that one man can do” is deceptively simple, but is full of significance. It is Fromm's chosen style. This style, as so much of his basic beliefs, has roots in rabbinical traditions, in biblical themes re-interpreted by him. This style is that of the prophets. Fromm describes the prophet role. Prophets do not predict the future. They present reality free from the blindfolds of public opinion and authority. They feel compelled to express the voice of their conscience to say what possibilities they see, to show the alternatives, and to warn the people. It is up to the people to take the warning and change or to remain deaf and blind. Prophetic language is always the language of alternatives, of choice, and of freedom. It is never that of determinism. The prophets dissent and protest when man takes the wrong road, but they do not abandon him. They do not think only in terms of individual salvation, but believe that individual salvation is bound up with the salvation of society.

It is important to appreciate the explicitness of Fromm's style. It is as explicit as that of Pi-

casso or any painter of recent deconstructionism. He paints a message. The message is to stir people out of any illusion that life can be lived well with any degree of passive submission, that it has to be lived actively with the knowledge that life constantly offers alternatives and that choice is important. That is the fundamental message. Separate from it, though not less important, are the specific messages of the wrong and the right road as Fromm sees them based on his humanitarian ethics.

Fromm's style of painting in black and white is rooted in the biblical fight against idolatry. You cannot understand God; you can try to understand what God is not. It is a negative theology. The same is true of our understanding of human beings. We can describe their persona, the mask they wear, their ego, but the living human being cannot be described like a thing. He cannot be described at all. His total individuality, his suchness which is unique, can never be fully understood, not even by empathy, for no two human beings are entirely alike.

Fromm's major work on aggression, in particular malignant aggression, which he called necrophilia, is written in part to tell us what is not biophilic.

To re-emphasize, let me compare again Fromm and Horney and Gould. Fromm and Horney agree on what a human being could be at best. They differ in that Horney believes in innate forces that strive towards self-realization. Fromm does not believe that people necessarily know their way even if not diverted by neurotic forces. Most people fail in the art of living, he believes, not because they are inherently bad or so without will that they cannot live a better life; they fail because they do not wake up and see when they stand at a fork of the road. They need to be alerted to their fate that they have to struggle to find the directions for living, to find answers to their lives by active participation. Gould and Fromm differ only in their hopes. Gould has no illusion that nature provides the answer, while Fromm (1967) still flirts with nature. In his book *The Revolution of Hope* he asks, almost with nostalgia, whether there is objective evidence at least suggestive that our norms should be guiding principles for all. He falls back on the premise of harmony and the



maximum of vitality and well-being, and given that premise the biophilious norms would be more conducive to the optimum of growth and well-being.

In spite of Fromm's belief in a negative theology, he has described the art of being alive in many ways. As Fromm's notion of a fully alive being is not different from our own implicit or explicit conception, I will mention only a few of his descriptions. „The person who fully loves life is attracted by the process of life and growth in all spheres. He prefers to construct rather than to retain. He is capable of wondering, and prefers to see something new rather than looking for the security of finding confirmation of the old. He loves the adventure of living. He sees the whole rather than the part. He enjoys life rather than just craving excitement” (*The Heart of Man*, 1964, p. 45). „What then is his identity in a human sense?... Identity is the experience which permits a person to say legitimately 'I' as an organizing active center of the structure of all his actual or potential activities. This experience of 'I' exists only in the state of spontaneous activity, but it does not exist in the state of passiveness and half awakens, a state in which people are sufficiently awake to go about their business but not awake enough to sense an 'I' as the active center within themselves. This concept of the 'I' is different from the concept of the ego” (1968, p. 87). Fromm (1976) often quotes Meister Eckhart, who taught that aliveness is conducive to joy. Meister Eckhart, the 13th century monk, found a most beautiful poetic expression for the idea of the creative power of laughter and joy. Fromm quotes Eckhart: „When God laughs at the soul and the soul laughs back at God, the persons of the Trinity are begotten. To speak in hyperbole, when the Father laughs to the son and the son laughs back to the Father, that laughter gives pleasure, that pleasure gives joy, that joy gives love, and love gives the persons [of the Trinity] of which the Holy Spirit is one” (p. 119).

Fromm (1976) describes being in conversation: „They come fully alive in the conversation, because they do not stifle themselves by anxious concern with what they have. Their own aliveness is infectious and often helps the other person to transcend his egocentricity... The conver-

sation becomes a dialogue in which it does not matter any more who is right. The dualists begin to dance together, and they part not with triumph or sorrow - but with joy.” Fromm here makes his few references to psychoanalytic treatment: „The essential factor in psychoanalytic therapy,” he writes, is this enlivening quality of the therapist. No amount of psychoanalytic interpretation will have an effect if the therapeutic atmosphere is boring” (p. 34).

Even this short description would be incomplete without mentioning the quality of hope. Hope to Fromm is ever important. It is an intrinsic element of the structure of life, of the dynamic of man's spirit. Hope is a psychic concomitant of life and growth. It is ever implied by the nature of life. Hope is looking forward to, is faith, is intention, is active wishing, is the excitement of ideas, or of an encounter. Hope is inherent in caring and in any creative endeavor. It is the emotion which energizes our search, our ideas, our activities, and enhances the intensity of meaning. However, hope is a constantly endangered phenomenon. Its vulnerability is extreme. Resignation, the no-hope counterpart, is destructive of life by omission.

Most of Fromm's writings are not about psychoanalysis or written to psychoanalysts. He did not write about the nature of neuroses, and very little about psychoanalytic technique, yet his writing has so much relevance. Fromm addresses above all the nature of the spirit which informs a productive life; the spirit which should guide all of our activities, including the activity of doing therapy. Therapy as well as life is an active enterprise. It cannot be done by following rules. We cannot look for the comforting guidance of the blueprint of a theory or of an instruction manual on technique. We have to be awake and alert, for there are many forks in the paths of any analytic session which demand our decision, be it intuitive or more thought out. Any event in a session is embedded in a network of many dimensions of existence, and any action or non-action on our part affects the course of that hour.

Psychoanalysis evolved in a period of scientific determinism, a determinism which became woven into the fabric of its theory and its therapeutic approaches. Thus as students of psycho-



analysis we learn to follow the blueprints. It is experience which teaches us to use our knowledge, our intuition, our caring and the basic truth that there is no answer to how to conduct life or how to conduct therapy written on a blackboard out there. There is a moral dimension to life, whether it is our own or our patient's life. This moral dimension has to be actively nurtured and is not just consequent to the absence or presence of psychopathology. We are not only therapists but also children of our Western cultural tradition. Our cultural values as well as our more personal ones are active ingredients in our way of conducting therapy, in what we respond to with pleasure or concern. We do want to make our patients into beings that are more capable of loving, of being creative and less destructive. Let us affirm the fact that those are our own precious values and are not just the absence of pathology. A constructive or productive life takes tender loving care.

Just as I was beginning to write this paper, I came across a wonderful article in *The New York Times* about Isaac Stern written by Yo Yo Ma (Sunday, October 14, 1990) which says it all. The article is entitled „Isaac Stern as an Enabler.“ It reads:

„When I was 15, Mr. Stern played the Mozart Sinfonia Concertante at one of Alexander Schneider's Christmas string seminars, and afterwards he talked about Casals. Casals is someone who shows you the way into beautiful art, and then it is up to you to explore it.

„That, I think, is Mr. Stern's Philosophy: he is generous, he reaches out, but the other person has to take an active hand and meet him half way. Just because you have talent doesn't mean you deserve everybody's adulation or generosity; you have to work hard and earn it. Still, the attitude I have seen in him during the entire time I have known him is one of giving, and often of giving

without condition.

„As busy as he is, he will- make time to see people... Why does he make that effort? It's not ambition or mere physical energy. Mr. Stern is deeply moved by things, by people, by music, by events. He cares about violin playing and about the profession, and he gets something in return: understanding. It's like a motor that gets him going and gives him reason to do more. When he sees this sort of motivation in other people, he calls it a fire in the belly.“

We too are enablers. We want to enable the patients to find and develop meaningful resources to improve the quality of their life. We hope to increase their sense of vitality and energy. Fromm reminds us that one ingredient of being a therapist or an enabler is to be fully alive ourselves, or, in Mr. Stern's words, to have at least „a little fire in the belly.“

References

- Angyal, A. (1950) *Neurosis and Treatment - A Holistic Theory*. Viking Press, New York.
- Fromm, E. (1962) *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*. Simon & Schuster, New York.
- Fromm, E. (1964) *The Heart of Man*. Harper & Row, New York.
- Fromm, E. (1968) *The Revolution of Hope*. Bantam Books, New York.
- Fromm, E. (1973) *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. Holt, Rinehart & Winston, New York.
- Fromm, E. (1976) *To Have or To Be?* Harper & Row, New York.
- Gould, S. J. (1987) „A Poet's Darwin.“ *Parnassus Poetry Review*, 14, New York.
- Hartmann, H. (1960) *Psychoanalysis and Moral Values*. University Press, New York.
- Horney, K. (1950) *Neurosis and Human Growth*. W. W. Norton, New York.
- Money-Kryle, R. D. (1961) *Man's Picture of His World*. International University Press, New York.