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Review Durkin, K.: The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm

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As a great admirer of Erich Fromm, I am gratified to see that, after a neglect of many years, there is a renewed interest in this author, as testified by the appearance of several books on him. I recently (Bacciagaluppi, 2013) reviewed a book by Friedman, whose main emphasis was biographical. This new book by Kieran Durkin describes Fromm's outlook as "radical humanism". This book is most timely in calling attention to this facet of Fromm's work, because, as the author states in the Introduction, the present intellectual climate is chiefly opposed to the essentialist notion of a nature of man and of its unfolding in the course of history. The book is also very scholarly. In addition to examining Fromm's published works, it also makes use of unpublished material, such as correspondence and recordings, contained in the Fromm Archives in Tübingen, and placed at the author's disposal by Rainer Funk, Fromm's literary executor.

Fromm's views are presented in six chapters. At the outset there is a very useful overview of Fromm's life and writings, from his orthodox Jewish beginnings in Frankfurt to his turn to sociology and psychoanalysis, then his move to the United States in 1934, to Mexico in 1950, and his final return to Europe, in Locarno, Switzerland, in 1974.

The roots of Fromm's radical humanism are then examined. The author lists three: Judaism, the early Marx, and Freud's psychoanalysis. In

Judaism Fromm was influenced by the prophetic tradition and the messianic idea of the unfolding of human potentialities in the course of history. Fromm finally arrived at a negation of theology and at a non-theistic humanism. The basic notion that Fromm got from Marx is that human nature is historically modified by economic and social circumstances. In his relationship to Freud, Fromm moved from an initial acceptance of Freud's drive model to a challenge of it, while retaining the importance of unconscious mental processes. This challenge led to a rift with the Frankfurt Institute of Sociology, the members of which still agreed with Freud's drive model. According to Fromm, Freud's main failures were an insufficient account of relatedness, and his later notion of a death instinct. Fromm views mankind as rooted in nature, but also as transcending it. This is what he calls a basic existential dichotomy, which leads to various "existential needs".

Kieran Durkin then discusses Fromm's idea of character. Unlike Freud, who regarded character as stemming from various parts of the body, Fromm viewed character types as comparatively permanent systems of relating. The basic distinction is between productive and unproductive character types. Fromm later added the related distinction between biophilia and necrophilia, and finally that between the having and the being modes. These character types are the core of Fromm's psychoanalytic social psychology, which may be regarded as his most specific



contribution. According to Fromm, society gives rise in individuals, through the family, to the character structure most suitable to its own perpetuation. This character structure, which he calls the social character, is present in the majority of individuals. For example, at present there is an increasing prevalence of the "marketing character". Other character structures, present in a minority of cases, may be selected if the social structure changes, through the process which Fromm calls "social selection". Before World War Two Fromm applied these concepts to a study of the character structure of German workers, and after the war to that of Mexican peasants. Fromm also held that society represses certain experiences, giving rise to the "social unconscious". More specifically, he speaks of three "social filters" of experiences: language, logic, and the taboos on certain ideas and feelings. A basic presentation of Fromm's analytic social psychology is contained in an Appendix to his first major work, *Escape from Freedom* (Fromm, 1941).

Durkin then discusses various recent authors who, in contrast to Fromm, may be described as anti-humanistic. He lists Althusser, Adorno, Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, Lyotard and Rorty.

The final chapter concerns Fromm's call for a renaissance of humanism, and "for human beings to be treated as ends rather than means" (p. 193) (this is the core of Immanuel Kant's ethics). In *The Sane Society* (Fromm, 1955) he presents some practical suggestions to achieve this aim.

As I did in a recent article published in *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* (Bacciagaluppi, 2014), Fromm's continuing relevance can be emphasized by showing the connections between his work and developments subsequent to his death in 1980, such as Bowlby's attachment theory and the literature on the evolution of altruistic behavior. In particular, although Fromm died before the completion of Bowlby's trilogy, he was quick to see that the concept of attachment provided the biological grounding of his own notion of the basic need for related-

ness, and in the Fromm Archives in Tübingen there is a copy of *Attachment* (Bowlby, 1969) with notes in Fromm's handwriting.

In Durkin's book, some more careful editing would have avoided several mistakes. To give only two examples, on pages 21 and 22 Fromm-Reichmann's first name is twice misspelt as "Freida" instead of "Frieda", and in the References "Cortina" precedes "Chodorow". Another remark concerns Durkin's principle of referring to an author's work by the date of the more recent edition, preceding the original date of publication. Sometimes the latter date is omitted, as on p. 63, where the reader is hard put to realize that Freud (2001a) is actually what the Standard Edition lists as Freud (1912-13), namely *Totem and Taboo*, and that Freud (2001b) is Freud (1927), namely *The Future of an Illusion*.

Aside from these formal remarks, this is a book to be highly recommended for pointing to the permanent value of Fromm's contributions.

References

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