

Carveth, D. (2015). Fromm Resurrected. *Review*: Durkin, K. (2014). *The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 250 pages, hardcover. ISBN 978-1-137-43639-9. *The Journal of Psychohistory* 43, 2 (Fall 2015): 147-155; and the *Canadian Journal of Psychoanalysis* 23, 2 (Fall 2015), in press.

In “How to become a forgotten intellectual,” McLaughlin (1998) cites the case of Erich Fromm and argues that “Fromm’s very public challenge to both Marxist and psychoanalytic orthodoxies created powerful enemies who were hostile to him because of the deep-seated loyalties and identifications that are created within intellectual movements” (p. 240). As a result, “... throughout the 1970s and 1980s the view of Fromm as a simplistic popularizer was institutionalized as a cliché among American intellectuals” (p. 237). Happily, the recent appearance of a new biography by Friedman (2013) and books such as those by Wilde (2004), Braune (2014) and Durkin (2014), among others, suggest a long overdue Fromm revival may be underway that will hopefully expose and rectify the caricature and denigration of the work of this important thinker.

Fromm has been widely viewed as a “neo-Freudian” member of the so-called “culturistic” school of psychoanalysis who, along with Karen Horney, Harry Stack Sullivan and others, in rejecting the “biologism” of the classical Freudian theory of the instincts, succumbed to a radically constructivist and culturally relativist “sociologism” that Dennis H. Wrong (1961) called “The over-socialized conception of man in modern sociology.” While agreeing with his critique of the one-sided social determinism prevalent in the mainstream structural-functionalist sociology of the 1950s, I subsequently argued against Wrong that to simply replace the *oversocialized* model of human nature with the *undersocialized* and *overly biologized* conception offered by Freudian drive theory is no solution (Carveth, 1977a; 1977b; 1982; 1984). Applying Wrong’s argument to the “reality-constructionism” of Berger and Luckman (1967), a sociological perspective that had emerged subsequent to Wrong’s critique, I argued that despite strong tendencies toward social determinism these authors both recognized this danger and pointed to what they considered a possible way out. Instead of, like Wrong, resorting to Freud’s somatically-based drives to counter social internalizations, they adopted a Sartrean existentialist concept of an ineradicable element of subjective freedom to resist, manipulate or detach from social pressures—to achieve an “ec-static” consciousness that to a degree transcends the socially constructed self and “world.”

Without realizing it consciously at the time, in my dissatisfaction with both *over-* and *under-*socialized models and my search for a dialectical solution to the *nature/nurture* polarity, I was at least following in the footsteps of Erich Fromm, if not actually in the grip of a type of *cryptamnesia* with respect to the work of an author whom I had studied thoroughly on my own as an undergraduate and whom, I now recognize, had not only defined for me my ambition to be both a sociologist and a psychoanalyst, but also the key intellectual problems and issues that would preoccupy me throughout my subsequent career. But by the time I was writing my doctoral dissertation, Fromm was a “forgotten intellectual” for many and all but forgotten by me as well. No doubt this had something to do with what Bloom (1973) has described as the “anxiety of influence,” the oedipally grounded, essentially parricidal wish to have no forbearers.

But I think even meaner, more prosaic motives were likely at work. The sheer snobbery pervading graduate studies and academia in general is not to be underestimated. As Durkin describes, a real “hatchet job” had been done on Fromm by Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse whose seemingly sophisticated (albeit at times virtually unreadable) “critical theory” was enjoying great prestige. In McLaughlin’s view, “Fromm’s clear writing and popular success also tended to lose him prestige among academic social scientists” (p. 237). What ambitious graduate student wants to hook his wagon to an author being misrepresented and dismissed as a simplistic popularizer?

Such is the power of academic fashion that even someone who, like myself, had extensively critiqued the one-sided social constructionism characterizing earlier sociological thought was slow to recognize that the anti-humanist, structuralist, post-structuralist and postmodern paradigms that came to predominate in social theory represented an even more extreme and unrealistic version of the same thing. Of course the obscurity of the prose of Foucault, Lacan, Derrida and company made it difficult to add two and two and come up with four. This discourse made one feel embarrassed for even wishing to find clarity in their texts and fearful of displaying one’s simple-mindedness by daring to write lucidly oneself. Aside from challenging orthodoxies, another way to become a forgotten intellectual is to write clearly.

One of the-many strengths of Durkin’s book is his analysis and defense of Fromm’s “radical humanism” against the impossibly exaggerated sociologism, even at times approximating what one writer (Benton, 2001) refers to as the “nature phobia” of anti-humanist postmodernism. Here Durkin joins a range of contemporary thinkers concerned to “challenge the excessive culturalism and anti-personalism which characterize most ‘postmodern’ thinking, whether it be structuralist, poststructuralist, or posthuman” and to promote “the *dialectical supersession* of the anti-humanist paradigm” (p. 211) in favor of a renaissance of humanism. If Fromm himself at times exaggerated humanity’s break with nature, as Durkin correctly points out, he at least insisted our existential dichotomy involves our being immersed by our bodies in it, even while through our symbolizing minds we transcend it. Although it is hard to forgive John Bowlby for his utterly false allegation that Melanie Klein denied the role of the real mother (Bowlby et al., 1986), his recognition that humans are primates and share with our primate cousins an unlearned, biologically grounded need for attachment (Bowlby, 1969-80) is invaluable, as is recent research (Bloom, 2013) demonstrating that infants (*in fans*: beneath language) as young as three months of age distinguish right from wrong and prefer the former over the latter. While not constituting evidence of an “innate” morality, for by three months infants have already had time to identify with the loving nurturance provided by their carers, such evidence, together with research on the prosocial behavior of other species, exposes the poverty of one-sided views of the human being as an exclusively culturally programmed “language animal” (Steiner, 1969).

None of the above is meant to in any way deny the validity and importance of the critique of essentialism in social and psychoanalytic theory, of ahistorical and ethnocentric notions of an unchanging and unchangeable human nature or essence. As Fromm himself frequently pointed out, Marx (and not, be it noted, merely the early Marx) distinguished between “human nature

in general” and “human nature as modified in each historical epoch” (*Capital*, Vol. 1, Chapter 24, Section 5, fn. 50). As Durkin makes abundantly clear, Fromm follows Marx in this distinction, adopting a “qualified essentialism” that recognizes the existence of human nature grounded in very general, universal biological and existential aspects of the human condition, but always as shaped by particular personal, historical and cultural circumstances. Both reductive, ahistorical essentialism and reductive, extreme social constructionism are rejected in this dialectical model.

As Durkin explains, because Fromm’s qualified essentialism enables him to distinguish human nature in general from its manifestations under particular historical and cultural circumstances he is able to recognize a range of universal human needs and dilemmas as revealed by the human sciences. In *Man for Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*, Fromm (1947) advances the idea of “objective” or “naturalistic ethics” in which “‘good’ is synonymous with good for man and ‘bad’ with bad for man” (p. 18). In other words, “there are objective norms and values stemming from the very nature of our existence” (Durkin, p. 189). But in my view there is a “naturalistic fallacy” at work here. Fromm (1947) writes:

But one can deduce norms from theories only on the premise that a certain activity is chosen and a certain aim is desired. The premise for medical science is that it is desirable to cure disease and to prolong life; if this were not the case, all the rules of medical science would be irrelevant. Every applied science is based on an axiom which results from an act of choice: namely, that the end of the activity is desirable. ... We can imagine a hypothetical culture where people do not want paintings or bridges, but not one in which people do not want to live. The drive to live is inherent in every organism, and man can not help wanting to live regardless of what he would like to think about it. The choice between life and death is more apparent than real; man’s real choice is that between a good life and a bad life (p. 18).

In a footnote to this passage Fromm argues that “Suicide as a pathological phenomenon does not contradict this general principle” (p. 18). But calling suicide “pathological” is merely an obscured way of saying that in Fromm’s opinion it is a bad choice. I have argued (Carveth, 2013, chapter 1) that it is long-standing strategy in a de-moralizing psychoanalysis that refuses to preach what it practices to employ the language of health and pathology to cloak the value judgments undergirding its theory and *praxis* from beginning to end.

The mere fact that many or even most people choose something in no way proves their choice is good. It is a gross oversimplification to say that “man cannot help wanting to live.” Many want to die and choose suicide. Fromm’s own (1973) account of the reality of “necrophilia,” the love of death, is evidence of this. Calling necrophilia “pathological” does no more than indicate one doesn’t like it because of one’s value preference for life. Regrettably, Durkin defends Fromm arguing that the idea that one cannot deduce an *ought* from an *is*, that reason and science are *descriptive* only and cannot be *prescriptive*, is based on a misunderstanding of Hume or G.E. Moore that has become a “virtually unchallenged dogma” (p. 189). This is not the

place for a discussion of the “virtue ethics revival”; suffice it to say that as an admirer of Fromm’s overall critical rationality I consider this sophistic slide from the *is* to the *ought* regrettable. And it is entirely unnecessary, for an ethics grounded in the study of human nature can be developed honestly, without at all obscuring the value choices involved.

According to Martin Buber (1938), for Immanuel Kant philosophy is comprised of answers to four questions: what can I know? (epistemology); what should I do? (ethics); what may I hope? (religion); what is man? (philosophical anthropology). Any answer to the fourth question automatically implies answers to the other three. This is due to the power of “the argument from human nature,” the syllogism in which the first of the two premises leading to a conclusion is a statement regarding the nature of human nature, while the second is the value judgment that human beings *ought* to be able to act in accordance with their nature and that society *should* be so organized as to allow or promote this. From these two premises, the second of which is an uncloaked value judgment, far-reaching moral and political conclusions may be drawn. If, for example, humans are naturally competitive, then unrestrained capitalism is the good society for it permits human beings to act according to their nature. But if humans are naturally cooperative then competitive capitalism is a bad system for it forces people to act against their nature, thus alienating or estranging them from their true or authentic selves. The human sciences inform us as to the essential nature of human nature (apart from its widely differing historical and cultural manifestations). We then plug this data into the syllogism, the argument from human nature, and—*voilà!*—important moral and political conclusions may be drawn without having to deceive ourselves about the leap beyond facts into values entailed in the second premise of our argument.

Durkin makes occasional passing comments about existentialism associating it with relativism, subjectivism and idealism but without clearly elaborating what he means or which thinkers he has in mind and, in this way, seeming to underplay its importance for Fromm. Yet, as he shows, Fromm rejects both reductive biological and environmental determinisms in favor of an existentialist view of the human being’s “emergence” as a self-conscious creature, rooted in nature by the body and yet significantly transcending it due to its capacity for symbolic processes, relatively free from instinctual determination and, hence, as in the Sartrean (1943) vision, suffering from a “fear of freedom” and a marked temptation to surrender it through one or more of the regressive solutions Fromm describes. Certainly, Sartre’s (1960) existential neo-Marxism can in no way be viewed as a radical subjectivism blind to what even in his earlier work Sartre recognized as “the force of circumstance.”

Durkin helpfully traces Fromm’s radical humanism to its early roots in prophetic messianism, in the Judaism that Fromm, like Marx, broke away from in favor of an atheistic secularization of these ethical and messianic themes. Regrettably, in my view, Fromm chose to distinguish humanistic from authoritarian religion instead of distinguishing humanism from religion as such. To my ear the idea of humanist, atheistic religion is oxymoronic. While Buddhism is sometimes classified as a religion I think many of its adherents consider it a philosophy and way of life. While surrendering religion in practice, Fromm was unable to part with the sacred term, even though so-called humanistic demythologized religion really amounts to a rejection of

religion that its adherents are unwilling to acknowledge. As Freud (1930) put it: "It is ... humiliating to discover how large a number of people living today, who cannot but see that this religion is not tenable, nevertheless try to defend it piece by piece in a series of rearguard actions. One would like to mix among the ranks of the believers in order to meet these philosophers, who think they can rescue the God of religion by replacing him by an impersonal, shadowy and abstract principle, and to address them with the warning words: 'Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain!'" (p. 73).

Durkin has written a conscientious and insightful scholarly summation of Fromm's theory, carefully describing its development, shifts and elaborations over time. The result is by no means an uncritical study. I counted at least fifteen clear points of criticism in this text. It is admirable that while acknowledging the general validity of many of these criticisms, due to his overall sympathy with Fromm's project Durkin seeks to carefully qualify and contextualize them in a way most fair and generous to Fromm. But in regard to what I consider the major flaw in Fromm's theory, the anthropocentrism that pervades it from beginning to end, Durkin addresses only his exaggeration of human uniqueness and minimizing of the intelligence and complexity of other species when the real issue is the collective human narcissism that places humanity at the center with, as the Bible says, *dominion* over the rest of creation.

If for humanism "man is the measure of all things" is anthropocentrism not an inextricable element of it? Can one envisage a post-anthropocentric humanism capable of meaningfully addressing anthropogenic climate disruption (ACD) in what is increasingly recognized as the anthropocene, the likely site of the coming sixth mass extinction (Kolbert, 2013; Carveth, 2014)? Durkin writes that "by his last work, *To Have or to Be*, he [Fromm] is clear on his need for a relationship of balance and respect with nonhuman nature" (p. 210). If so, this came late and does not exempt the main body of his work from the charge that Durkin rejects: that it reflects "a vainglorious speciesism" (p. 210). In a footnote to his "Conclusion," on the last two pages of his book, Durkin briefly addresses Benton's (2001, 2009) work which "has been to challenge the overemphasis placed on human exceptionalism and thus to criticize 'humanism' understood in terms of its anthropocentric excesses" (p. 227). Yet here again he evades the wider challenge acknowledging only "Fromm's overdrawn account of evolutionary discontinuity" and the need to "reclaim the animality in humanity (which, of course, is a part of reclaiming humanity in itself)" (p. 228). Here, reclaiming animality, or life on this planet in general, appears subordinate to reclaiming the animality *in humanity* as a part of reclaiming *humanity* itself. Humanity is still at the centre. In describing Benton's work, Durkin edges away from its main challenge to humanism.

Following Marx, Fromm located human nature, our "species-being," in *productive activity*. But it is unrestrained, Promethean activity, industry and "growth" in both capitalist and "socialist" forms, that has and is destroying our ecosystems and, hence, ourselves. It is true, as Durkin points out, that "In all the influences Fromm draws upon, a central stress is laid on achieving greater awareness, becoming open and responsive and on the need to experience oneself in the act of being, not in having, preserving, coveting, using. ... Common to all, then, is the goal of overcoming greed, narcissism, and egoism ..." (p. 186). Yet in the very next sentence Durkin

goes on to say “these ideas correspond to the concept of the *productive* orientation to life, which involves the spontaneous *activity* of one’s own mental and emotional *powers* and the *achievement* of interpersonal relations based on the qualities of love and reason” (p. 187; all but the first are my emphases). This stress upon productivity, activity, powers, and achievement exists, to my mind, in tension with Fromm’s late groping toward the values of *being*. It is true, as Durkin points out, that in his later years Fromm became interested in Buddhism, especially Zen, and began to distinguish *being* from *having*—but notably not from *doing*. Given the centrality of productive activity in Fromm’s very definition of human nature and his devaluation of passivity, I was not surprised to learn from Friedman (2013) of Fromm’s hyperactive personal style (hence Friedman’s title, not *The Life* but *The Lives of Erich Fromm*), or of the sequence of heart attacks that finally killed him. As I write I’m looking out over the Gulf of Mexico and wondering how much time after moving here Fromm managed to put in at the beach? In my view a critique of humanism for what appears to be its intrinsic anthropocentrism need not amount to “anti-humanism,” only perhaps to a chastened post-humanism.

Like Freud, Fromm was too sophisticated a thinker to simply equate masculine with activity and feminine with passivity. Durkin apologizes to contemporary readers for not seeking to reverse Fromm’s choice not to substitute terms like “humanity” or “human” for the generic “man” used so frequently in his texts even after most scholars had become alert to gender issues. While as Kellner (n.d.) points out, Fromm’s early essays on Bachofen’s theory of matriarchy “contain some provocative perspectives on the question of women’s liberation” and celebrate matricentric over patricentric values, his major post-war texts “either lack a discussion of gender or reproduce cultural commonplaces on the differences between men and women.”

The values of nurturance, care and responsibility toward the other (unnecessarily gendered as “matricentric”) might have mitigated the destructiveness arising from an unbalanced embrace of the (unnecessarily gendered as “patricentric”) values of individuation, activity and achievement. Our obsession with *doing* over *being* has contributed to our malaise, even perhaps to our demise. While it might have been possible for us to learn from aboriginal cultures to see ourselves as *part of* rather than *apart from* nature, we chose instead to destroy them and it. Fromm offers an insightful critique of narcissism in favor of an ethic of love and concern for the other, but seldom extends such concern to mother nature, thus manifesting the collective narcissism that is anthropocentrism. In its stress upon separation and individuation from “regressive” and “primitive” symbiosis with nature and community, Fromm’s radical humanism, while insightfully identifying and criticizing many aspects of our cultural pathology, at the same time reflects and fails to transcend it. Fromm (1980) described the *Greatness and Limitations of Freud’s Thought*. Durkin’s timely study both highlights the greatness and exposes the limitations of Fromm’s.

References

- Benton, T. (2001). Why are sociologists naturephobes? In J. Lopez & G. Porter (eds). *After Postmodernism*. London: Athlone Press.
- Benton, T. (2009). *Natural Relations: Ecology, Animal Rights and Social Justice*. London: Verso.

- Berger, P. & T. Luckman (1967). *The Social Construction of Reality*. New York: Doubleday.
- Bloom, H. (1973). *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bloom, P. (2013). *Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil*. New York: Crown.
- Bowlby, J. (1969-80). *Attachment and Loss*, Vols. 1-3. London: Penguin.
- Bowlby, J., Figlio, K., & Young, R.M. (1986). An interview with John Bowlby on the origins and reception of his work. *Free Associations* 1: 36-64.
- Braune, J. (2014). *Erich Fromm's Revolutionary Hope: Prophetic Messianism as the Critical Theory of the Future*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Buber, M. (1938). What is man? Section V in *Between Man and Man*. R.G. Smith (trans.). New York: Collins, pp. 148-240.
- Carveth, D. (1977). The Hobbesian microcosm: on the dialectics of the self in social theory." *Sociological Inquiry* 47: 3-12.
- Carveth, D. (1977b). The disembodied dialectic: a psychoanalytic critique of sociological relativism." *Theory & Society* 4, 3: 73-102.
- Carveth, D. (1982). Sociology and psychoanalysis: the Hobbesian problem revisited. *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 7, 2: 201-229.
- Carveth, D. (1984). Psychoanalysis and social theory: the Hobbesian problem revisited. *Psychoanalysis & Contemporary Thought* 7,1: 43-98.
- Carveth, D. (2013). *The Still Small Voice: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Guilt and Conscience*. London: Karnac.
- Carveth, D. (2015). Review of *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* by Elizabeth Kolbert. *Journal of Psychohistory* 42, 3 (Winter 2015): 257-260.
- Freud, S. (1930). Civilization and Its Discontents. *S.E.*, 21: 57-146. London: Hogarth.
- Friedman, L. (2013). *The Lives of Erich Fromm: Love's Prophet*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Fromm, E. (1947). *Man for Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*. New York: Rinehart.
- Fromm, E. (1973). *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. London: Pimlico, 1997.
- Fromm, E. (1980). *The Greatness and Limitations of Freud's Thought*. New York: London: Abacus, 1982.
- Kellner, D. (n.d.). Erich Fromm, feminism and the Frankfurt School: reflections on Patricia Mills' *Woman, Nature, and Psyche*. Retrived: <https://pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/Illumina%20Folder/kell27.htm>
- Kolbert, E. (2014). *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*. New York: Henry Holt & Co.
- Marx, K. (1867). *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Vol.1. PDF retrieved from: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-I.pdf>
- McLaughlin, N. (1998). How to become a forgotten intellectual: intellectual movements and the rise and fall of Erich Fromm. *Sociological Forum* 13, 2.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1943). *Being and Nothingness: A Study in Phenomenological Ontology*. H. Barnes (Trans.). New York: Philosophical Library, 1953.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1960). *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*. A. Sheridan-Smith (Trans.). London: New Left, 1976.
- Steiner, G. (1969). The language animal. *Encounter*, August: 7-23. Reprinted in *Extra-Territorial*:

Papers on Literature and the Language Revolution. New York: Atheneum, 1971.
Wilde, L. (2004). *Erich Fromm and the Quest for Solidarity*. New York: Palgrave.
Wrong, D.H. (1961). The oversocialized concept of man in modern sociology. *American Sociological Review* 26: 183-193.

Donald L. Carveth, Ph.D.
Emeritus Professor of Sociology and Social & Political Thought, York University
Training and Supervising Analyst, Canadian Institute of Psychoanalysis
Registered Psychotherapist, College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario
Email: dcarveth@gmail.com
Web: www.yorku.ca/dcarveth
Mail: 89 Orchard View Blvd.,
Toronto, ON M4R1C1