



**Erich Fromm:**

## **The Aloneness Of Man**

*John Henry O'Connor, O. P.*

Who is man? What is man? These are questions which have echoed down the labyrinthine corridors of man's mind for centuries. One contemporary author who offers thought-provoking answers to these timeless questions is the noted psychologist-philosopher Erich Fromm. Born in Germany around 1900, he studied at the Univer-

sity of Heidelberg and received his Ph.D. in 1926 from the University of Munich. He attended the Psycho-Analytic Institute in Berlin until 1926, leaving Germany for America in 1932. He has lectured widely in this country while at the same time teaching and writing. Some of his better known works are *Man For Himself*, *The Sane Society*, and *The Art of Loving*. His most recent contributions are *Beyond the Chains of Illusion* and *The Heart of Man*. Currently Fromm instructs other analysts at the University of Mexico, travels, lectures and continues his probing search into the nature of man.

It is Fromm's contention that modern man is oppressed by the problem of human existence in a world which is "indifferent to his fate." His solution to man's problem is surely that of the humanist, for the remedy lies within the power of man himself.

Fromm believes that Western man is the product of a long evolutionary process, the pinnacle of which was reached with the gifted humanist writers of the nineteenth century, Goethe and Marx. The truly cosmopolitan mind, the man whose country is the world, whose race is mankind, epitomizes this humanistic spirit. The periods of outstanding achievement in the cycle would be Greece of the Age of Pericles, Christianity of the Thirteenth Century, the Renaissance and the Eighteenth Century Enlightenment. These were all ages of belief and hope, brilliant and uplifting in the progress of man.

Man's problem, as Fromm sees it, is his lack of harmony with nature and the world about him. This split or dis-equilibrium is the result of man's birth as human. The birth of mind in man has created a lack of unity in human existence which man forever seeks to solve or unravel. Being aware of himself and his situation, the human situation, man cannot return and vegetate in purely animal contentment. His animal needs, the bodily demands for food, drink, and sex, are easily satisfied. Yet the satisfaction of these needs does not only fail to make man happy; it is not even sufficient to make him sane. Man's human needs, those which arise from the contradiction in his existence are not so easily understood and satisfied.

When man emerged from harmony with nature he was born with a rudimentary reason. This was the only weapon or tool he possessed to enable him to cope with his new situation. Man had now to depend on his reason to help restore some type of harmony in his life. For the former adjustment of his life in nature had been shattered. The union with nature had been severed irrevocably.

This disharmony of man was at the very heart of his existence. He could not return to his former home in nature; by accident he had been cast into his new life. For Fromm man is something of an accident. He calls him the *freak of the universe*. However, by being aware of himself there was now a tremendous conflict in man. He was no longer purely an animal, operating and responding to the world by simple instinct. Mind, by making man aware of himself, makes him aware of his problem. He sees himself alone in a world of turmoil. He views himself as an insignificant atom in a world of chaos. If he could comprehend-in-depth his real position in all its naked reality, his life would be unbearable. His only certainty is of the past which is dead, and of his future end which is death. Mind now tends to force man to solve his problem and the curse of it all is that man never attains a satisfactory solution. "It is man's fate that his existence is beset by contradictions which he has to solve without ever solving them."<sup>1</sup>

How should man go about trying to solve his existential problem? How does Fromm suggest man restore unity, equilibrium, and harmony to his life? The only true solution for man that does not end in insoluble conflict is a new relationship of the person which connects him with man and nature. This relationship is one of spontaneous activity, says Fromm, between the individual and the world. It results in a new relatedness with the world whereby the individual realizes his new freedom and yet preserves his individuality. Two important fruits of this new relationship of relatedness are the growth of freedom and productive work. "There is only one possible productive solution for the relationship of individualized man with the world: his active solidarity with all men and his spontaneous activity, love, and work, which unite him

<sup>1</sup> Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society*, p. 362.

again with the world, but now as a free and independent individual."<sup>2</sup>

For Fromm man's greatest achievement in becoming human is his freedom. Man is no longer determined to a limited instinctual reaction to nature. He is free and the most important object of his freedom, according to Fromm, should be himself. Man can now determine, within the limits set by the laws of his nature, his own mode of life.

Some men cannot face this freedom productively. Freedom with all its uncertainty weighs down on them. They are lonely, filled with anxiety and uncertainty. Weak men surrender to these irrational impulses and seek submission and conformity in some new type of bondage. Freedom with all its challenges, conflicts, and fears is too much for them. According to Fromm, such men have become in actual fact automatons. Now they are no longer alone and afraid because they are just like millions of others who have also surrendered their freedom and have lost their individuality in an ocean of conformity. The price for such conformity is very high. . . . their freedom, their individuality.

There is however a positive path for man opposed to this escape into new bondage and subjection. It is a new orientation wherein man accepts his freedom as an opportunity to advance toward new achievements. This positive freedom is identical with the full realization of the individual's potentialities, together with his ability to live actively and spontaneously. "By one course man can progress of *positive freedom*; he can relate himself spontaneously to the world in love and work, in the genuine expression of his emotional, sensuous and intellectual capacities."<sup>3</sup> Following this course, by boldness, initiative, ability and courage man can advance himself and by a productive relatedness to the blind and sinister forces of the world, he can freely and fully realize his own personality. He can develop all his human powers in a satisfying relationship of love and work. He accepts the challenge of individuality: to think and act for himself. Easy compulsion seeking safe security,

<sup>2</sup> Erich Fromm, *Escape From Freedom*, p. 36.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 140.

he shuns as weak and a surrender to his irrational forces. He uses his freedom to grow and to live, to express himself spontaneously and positively, to unfold his personality.

In addition to using his freedom properly to restore unity to his life, another aspect of the correct approach to man's problem is what Fromm refers to as the "productive orientation". Man to be happy, to be sane, to be truly human, must be productive. Fromm terms the productive use of man's powers as the development of his potencies. In *Man For Himself* he writes, "With his power of reason man can penetrate the surface of phenomena and understand their essence. With his power of love he can break through the wall which separates one person from another. With his power of imagination he can visualize things not yet existing; he can plan and thus begin to create."<sup>4</sup> These powers are inherent in the nature of man and it is the real goal of every man to realize these potentialities in actuality. Man's true aim in life is not just any activity or frantic seeking to find himself. His only worthwhile work in life is to become a true human person. And as much as he develops these human qualities so much is he a productive and truly human being.

Since we are speaking of man here as being productive, the question naturally arises: "What does he produce?" Fromm goes on to state that "by far the most important object of man's productiveness is man himself."<sup>5</sup>

Although man can manipulate the material universe to create, while he can use his power of mind to create systems of thought and works of art, his greatest and most outstanding achievement is to create himself as a total human personality. Man produces himself by living a life in which he makes a conscious and deliberate effort to be a sound, healthy person in all his avenues of possibility. The time from birth to death is just one long process of the unfolding and development of man's inherent qualities. Man grows and develops his physical powers naturally and without effort. But to develop one's intellectual and emotional life takes

<sup>4</sup> Fromm, *Man For Himself*, p. 88.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

conscious effort and critical attention at all times. Therefore man's whole life consists in the process of giving birth to all the powers of his nature. We are always giving birth to ourselves. The sadness of it all is man always dies before he is fully born. Even for the most gifted death always blights this birth-giving cycle before its full realization is attained.

Following this same line of thought Fromm emphasizes that living itself is an art. Modern man knows that to be a doctor or engineer requires considerable study but feels that living requires no skill at all. Just because everyone "lives" in some fashion, life is considered a matter in which everyone qualifies as an expert. Human living is the most difficult and complex art practiced by man. "In the art of living man is both the artist and the object of his art; he is the sculptor and the marble; the physician and the patient."<sup>6</sup>

Herein lies the very meaning of life for Fromm. Man creates and is responsible for himself. He must realize that his life and the art of living is all that really matters in this world. It is not success, prestige, and money that he should be for. He should be for himself. For Fromm the purpose of man's life is to become what he potentially is. He must develop and unfold all his human powers.

"There is only one solution to his problem: to face the truth, to acknowledge his fundamental aloneness and solitude in a universe indifferent to his fate, to recognize that there is no power transcending him which can solve his problem for him. Man must accept the responsibility for himself and the fact that only by using his powers can he give meaning to his life. . . . there is no meaning to life except the meaning man gives his life by the unfolding of his powers, by living productively . . ."<sup>7</sup>

Undoubtedly Erich Fromm offers a valuable insight into the nature of man. Unquestionably, man can give meaning to his existence by perfecting himself, by developing his potentialities to the utmost. However, for the Christian, the psychologist's solution is incomplete. Such an approach to the nature of man fails to take into account the Christian truths of original sin and grace. Of

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 44-45.

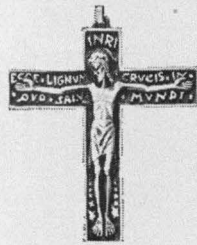
course man's life is to be productive. Yet, it is not man who gives the ultimate meaning to his life. Man does not achieve the realization of his potentialities unaided. Man is not reduced to the helpless position of aloneness in Christian thought. God, through Christ, is pointing out the true meaning of human existence to every man who seeks it from Him. Again, through Christ the Father offers the strength necessary to overcome the problems and dangers encountered in the human situation. There is a transcending power who cares about man and leads him to his ultimate destiny. Man is for this personal God. He is not for himself. Yes, man is to be productive; he is to strive for perfection, the full development of all his potentialities; not for himself, but for God. "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or do anything else, do all for the glory of God." (I Cor. 10:31)

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