

The Future and the Measure of All Things

By

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Although you can be sure this is not the last you'll hear me reference social psychologist, Erich Fromm, it is the final sermon in my "Measure of All Things" series, during which, just about every other week since May, we've been envisioning what our world might look like if, as Fromm says, "human welfare" were the "sole criterion of ethical value" ¹ and "the unfolding and growth of every person [were] the aim of all [our] social and political activities..."² I call it, "The Future and the Measure of All Things," because I want to wrap up by summarizing the vision I've been laying out—measuring the value of all we do by this humanistic ethic—then discussing some of the obstacles in the way, and considering the possibility of it ever coming true.

I began the series by mentioning Sigmund Freud's idea that society is at odds with the individual. From society's perspective, he said, "civilization has to be defended against the individual, and its regulations, institutions and commands are directed to that task."³ This, I think, remains mostly true today and is, obviously, at odds with an ethic in which the welfare of all people and the unfolding and growth of every person is the main goal. For a society to maintain its cohesion it usually relies upon conventional thinking and morality in which everyone is taught and pressured to mostly feel, think, and act alike. In such a society, there's little encouragement or toleration for individual divergence and authenticity. Yet, there is some, especially for those we genuinely love.

Love, which Fromm defines as, "*the sense of responsibility, care, respect, knowledge of any other human being, the wish to further [that person's] life,*" is the core of the humanistic ethic. Without such love, such a future is not possible. But we know such love does exist, even if it's not widespread, even if, that is, it's mostly expressed between individuals who care about each other, though not yet ubiquitously by a society that truly cares about the welfare of all its citizens. Even on this grander scale, however, such love—resource starved as it may be—is demonstrated through social and welfare programs, nonprofits, nongovernmental agencies, and charities. This would indicate, though they often face an uphill struggle, there are many in the world today who do care about the wellbeing of everyone and everything. It's possible, then, such compassion could be strengthened as more of us make human welfare and the unfolding and growth of every person our moral center. It may even be, as many are beginning to talk about now, that we eventually won't need special welfare programs because we'll fashion a society designed to guarantee everyone a certain standard of living and quality of life.

So, the humanistic ethic isn't something we can but merely imagine and hope for. It already exists. Most of us already have it, even those who reserve it only for those closest to them.

¹ Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, Henry Holt & Company, Inc., New York, NY, 1947, p. 13.

² *Ibid.*, p. 229.

³ Freud, Sigmund, *The Future of an Illusion*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, NY, 1961, 1989, p. 7.

This, I don't believe, is so because our love is naturally limited but, precisely because, from the time we are born, all of our society's "regulations, institutions and commands" have been directed to the task of suppressing our normal unfolding, stunting our full power to love and fixating our moral development at the inadequate conventional stage. Being good, we are educated to believe, just means obeying the rules and doing what is expected of us, never straying from the assigned path, from what others insist must be normal—the normal color, the normal gender, the normal sexuality, the normal religion, the normal beliefs, the normal country, and so on. A society as we've been envisioning it, however, that makes the humanistic ethic—rather than conventional morality and incomplete people—the measure of its success, would enable our power to love to reach its fullest potential.

For now, it is our inability to fully love one another that currently prevents us from moving forward with our innate humanistic ethic, with our natural ability and desire to love one another. For genuine love, you'll recall, as Fromm says, "is characterized by its lack of exclusiveness..."⁴ His mantra, which I've repeated often in this series, is, "If I can say to somebody else, 'I love you, I must be able to say, 'I love in you everybody, I love through you the world, I love in you also myself.'"⁵ Mature love cannot be reserved for only a few people related to ourselves. Our *sense of responsibility, care, respect, and knowledge* of others, that is, cannot be limited to the members of our own family, our own kin, our own kind, our own school, or church, or neighborhood, or country, but must encompass all people, known and unknown, those like us and those dislike us, and, ultimately, all beings, including our nonhuman relatives, other animals, the plants and trees, as well as the soil, water, and air.

This last point is an important one, for it's easy to mistake the humanistic ethic for an anthropocentric one. The anthropocentric ethic positions humans at both the center and apex of existence, as the completed work of God and/or evolution. The humanistic ethic, by contrast, recognizes our interdependence and relatedness to the environment, to all beings, and to the entire Universe. Fromm says, "The necessity to unite with other living beings, to be related to them, is an imperative need on the fulfillment of which [human] sanity depends."⁶ This means humanity cannot fully unfold, he continues, "in a state of unrelatedness to the world outside."⁷

Nor is the humanistic ethic a form of ethical egoism. Egoism means caring for only our own interest and represents a gross state of fixation at the most infantile level of maturation. The notion that we should love only ourselves by looking out for our own welfare and, at best, those few we consider like us, genetically and ideologically, whom we consider extensions of ourselves, reflects the opposite of the all-encompassing love at the heart of the humanistic ethic. It is only through loving the whole world, by which I mean caring, respecting, knowing, and taking responsibility for it, that we can truly love ourselves.

⁴ Fromm, Erich, *The Art of Loving*, Bantam Books, Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1956, 1963, p. 39.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Fromm, *Man for Himself*, *ibid.*, p. 14.

⁷ Ibid.

When I spoke of Earth and the Measure of All Things, I contrasted the concocted Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, with the real Trinity of Self, Others, and Earth. You may recall, the Trinitarian doctrine was invented seventeen-hundred years ago when the Council of Nicaea decided God and Jesus were *homoousios*, meaning “one substance.” But if being of one substance is the proof of unity, then it is Self, Others, and the Earth that are the true Trinity. The very word, *human*, means Earth, for we have come from the Earth and part of it, and part of one, indivisible human species, more genetically alike than most any other species on the planet. So, the humanistic ethic requires a future in which we care for the Earth and all beings upon it. *Holy* means *wholeness*. The Holy Spirit is just another term for the “the Spirit of Wholeness” that recognizes Self, Others, and Earth are *homoousios*, one substance, a holy trinity.

With such a future in mind, we’ve envisioned a global society that fully and adequately funds public education for all, with an emphasis on developing well-rounded, open-minded, fully developed individuals, not merely a continuing supply of proletariats. It would include publicly funded higher education, through two years of liberal arts learning and two years of hands on learning in the field of one’s choice. This will be done through partnerships between Universities, Trade Schools, and employers offering classes and internships so students end up with the practical skills, experience, and contacts necessary for starting a career immediately upon graduating (without being in debt). The cost can be shared by the publicly funded universities and the companies and organizations benefiting from internships and apprentices.

We’ve envisioned replacing our punitive criminal justice system with a restorative justice system that works to make the victims of crime as whole again as possible, while figuring out what went wrong in the lives of the perpetrators, and what we can do to help them make amends and fully unfold as loving human beings. Instead of a system that equates justice with time spent locked away in a cage, we considered a system that repairs the damage caused by crime, and the damage that leads to it, eliminating the need for prisons altogether. Those few who truly need to be kept separate for their own safety and the safety of others can be housed in humane places where they are loved, meaning they are respected, well treated, and cared for.

We’ve envisioned a future when, instead of focusing on the most sensational stories, whether a terrible disaster or something crude a celebrity happens to say, journalism prioritizes the news according to human need and wellbeing. If this were the case, I’m guessing we’d all be hearing a lot more about Global Warming than we are now, and other important matters hidden by excessive coverage of juvenile tweets and petty scandals. In the future, the Fairness Doctrine—balance—must be restored in journalism, and the corporate owned media, which has become too big to succeed, must be broken up, just as Standard Oil and AT&T once were under the Sherman Antitrust Act. For it is not possible for the media to be free when it is controlled by so few with personal and political interests all their own.

We’ve envisioned an economy that isn’t just about money, but about the stewardship and care of all our resources, including natural resources, energy, productivity, medicine, and education, with the goal of maximizing human wellbeing and happiness. The Greek word

from which it derives, *οικονομια*, refers to the welfare of all the members of a family. Under the humanistic ethic, it means all the members of the human family. It means returning, as Fromm says, to this “most important of all” attitudes which, “had determined the life of [humanity] for centuries... the principle that society and the economy exists for [humankind], and not [humankind] for them.”⁸

We’ve envisioned today’s major religions also returning to their humanistic roots, which all emerged 2,000 to 3,000 years ago, in response to social injustices and oppression, to “bring relief to the poor, to heal the downtrodden, to proclaim liberty to the oppressed, and to set the captives free,”⁹ as written in *Amos*. “What mattered [then] was not what you believed,” Karen Armstrong explains, “but how you behaved.”¹⁰ The same must be true under a humanistic ethic, that the value of any religion, be it Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, or something else, be based on how it improves human welfare and promotes individual unfolding and growth.

We’ve envisioned a time when humanity is no longer divided into fictional Nation-States but recognizes it is part of a global human family in which all people enjoy the same universal rights, including the freedom to participate in its benefits and to come and go across the globe as they please. Fromm says, “Nationalism is our form of incest, our idolatry, is our insanity. Patriotism is its cult.”¹¹ The humanistic ethic requires us to see beyond our myths of segregation and separation, to discover a society that celebrates, shares, and is inspired by its differences, yet embraces all in the greater oneness of humanity.

Toward this end, we’ve envisioned a society in which history records the achievements of humans, unadulterated by the myth of *εθνος*, the Greek word for “nation,” and the root of “ethnic” and “ethnicity.” The humanistic ethic requires us to consider historical events in terms of how they have impacted human welfare and individual unfolding and growth, not as propaganda exaggerating National glory while too often ignoring the injustices and cruelties the nations obtaining such glory have caused.

We’ve envisioned a future in which we are truly capable of loving our enemies, not because we like them, but because, under the humanistic ethic, love isn’t a feeling but a *sense of responsibility, care, respect, and knowledge* of others. It doesn’t mean we have to like everyone, only that we are obligated to create a society in which everyone, known and unknown, like or disliked, are treated well and have an opportunity to flourish. There have been many people in this world I have disliked, but this doesn’t mean I want them to suffer. Nor does loving them mean they should not be held accountable for wrongdoing, especially for impeding the welfare and growth of others. It means, rather, I want them to fully unfold so they too may understand and learn to live by the humanistic ethic. It means wanting my foes to become all they are capable of being.

⁸ Fromm, Erich, *The Sane Society*, Henry Holt & Company, New York, NY, 1955, p. 85.

⁹ Isaiah 61:1

¹⁰ Armstrong, Karen, *The Great Transformation*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, NY, 2006, p. xiii.

¹¹ Fromm, *ibid.*, p. 58.

Finally, we've envisioned a society in which we reason with one another, using logic, rather than rationalizing our emotions and ideologies, demonizing those with whom we disagree in the process. Love requires us to see others for who they really are, beyond our prejudices and subjective blindness. "Thinking is a form of productive love,"¹² Fromm says, because it allows us to objectively see others for who they are, beneath our prejudices, to "discover their essence, their hidden relationships, and deeper meanings, their 'reason.'" The humanistic ethic requires us to be reasonable, thoughtful people. It means hearing, not fearing, what others have to say, no matter how much we disagree. Reason is love, Fromm says, because it is the faculty that allows us to "to embrace the whole world with which [we] are confronted."¹³

So the greatest obstacle in the way of creating a future in which the sole criterion of all we do, all our *regulations, institutions and commands*, becomes human welfare and individual unfolding, is the suppression of our natural power to love—love that is allowed to fully unfold with the unhindered development of every person. But there is another big obstacle confronting such a future too—time. Does our species have enough time left to reach its full potential before we go extinct? I'm not talking about Global Warming, which is a serious threat to our continued existence, though one I'm hopeful we will and are overcoming. I'm talking about the technological revolution we're now in and what it means for our evolution.

Until now, evolution on Earth has been a very slow, though accelerating, biological process that's taken billions, then millions, then thousands of years. Today, however, technology is evolving exponentially every few years and the Age of Artificial Intelligence is now upon us. Some fear this means an end to the human species, that our intelligent machines will eventually rise against us and wipe us out. I personally believe such fears are the stuff of conspiracy theories and science fiction. There are a swelling number of videos on YouTube reflecting this exaggerated fear. One of them claims Sophia—the AI robot that's fast becoming an international celebrity—is the Whore of Babylon the *Book of Revelation* has predicted will come during the end of days. In the 1980s many claimed Russian leader Mikhail Gorbachev was the Antichrist because of the birthmark (the "mark of the beast") on his forehead. More recently some said it was Barack Obama because he secretly planned to create a New World Order. Today they're saying AI is the Antichrist.

I know there are genuine concerns about Artificial Intelligence, but I don't hold the same level of concern about it as the conspiracy theorists do. Nor do I feel it's going to enslave and eventually wipe us out. AI, rather, is a tool that is already and will increasingly alter how we do things, probably to the point that our behavior becomes radically different that it has been for humans in the immediate past. These behavioral adaptations, along with technological augmentation to our biology, through implants and gene editing, could arguably make us a new species altogether. And because technology evolves in just a few years, only months sometimes, *homo sapiens* may soon become *homo technicus*. At the very least technology is

¹² Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, *ibid.*, p. 96.

¹³ *Ibid.*

expected to lead to a bifurcation of our species, so that those who choose not to merge with it will be something like the Neanderthals that once coexisted with *Homo sapiens*.

What I'm saying is, it's difficult to imagine a future in which homo Sapiens have the time necessary to achieve our fullest potential as individuals and societies when we are on the verge of evolving into a new species altogether. Yet, despite our myths to the contrary, humans are not the center and apex of existence. The Universe is nearly 14 billion years old, and we've been here for only the last 200,000 years. Like 99 percent of all species ever to have lived on Earth, we too are destined to become extinct, not, hopefully, through a cataclysmic event, but by evolving into something new. The issue for us is that we can see it coming. Evolution is now happening so fast that our species may shift into another within our own lifetimes. I know this may still sound like science fiction to some, but I am on the cutting-edge of a conversation that's being taken very seriously by many these days, and, in the next few years will be commonplace.

Unlike some, I'm not frightened by these coming changes. I think, just as we have adapted to having computers and cellphones in a very short time, hardly able to remember what life was like without them, we won't feel fundamentally different even though our new abilities will be dramatically different than they are today. Evolution is an exponential process of convergence through which divergent parts merge together in greater levels of complexity. Merging with technology, instead of merely keeping it on our desktops, laptops, or in our pockets (notice it keeps getting closer), will happen almost unnoticed, and we'll still fundamentally be ourselves when it does. If this is so, then it means that which makes us human today will survive into the future, even as it becomes more. Just as the quantum particles, chemicals, and single cells that formed the first lifeforms on Earth are still part of us, we shall be part of whatever comes next.

It was way back in 1994, before I even had Internet in my home, or thoughts of a cellphone, that I read Frank Tipler's book, *The Physics of Immortality*, in which he talks about "the colonization of the universe by intelligent robots, by self-reproducing machines."¹⁴ What I found astounding was that Tipler referred to these robots as people. "I call intelligent robots 'people,'" he says, "because that is what they are... a 'person' is defined by qualities of mind and soul, not by a particular bodily form."¹⁵

This is why, despite the rapid, life altering changes that are upon, I remain hopeful our future will include the humanistic ethic, that this will be the best of what our species contributes to life when, like the dodo, the people of the future wonder what it must have been like when *homo sapiens* roamed the Earth. Just as today we look at the bones of whales and see remnants of legs and feet, proving their ancestors once walked on land, when the people of the future look back at us, perhaps they will see the remnants in us of that which remains in them, and most makes them who they are, lovers of life devoted to the common welfare and full unfolding of all persons and all beings.

¹⁴ Tipler, Frank J., *The Physics of Immortality*, Anchor Books, Doubleday, New York, NY, 1994, p. 86.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 87