

“The Measure of All Things”
A Humanistic Approach to Morality
By
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March 19, 2017

Last Sunday I presented a case for considering that our personalities are as innate as our hair and eye color, and that throughout our lives our own unique personalities strive to unfold, to become fully expressed, to fulfill their destiny. As individuals, this notion affirms our uniqueness, the authenticity, that is, of our own thoughts, feelings, and creative ways of being, and calls upon us to do our utmost to express our fullness by freeing ourselves from the social expectations and cultural artificialities preventing us from seeing and being who we really are. Today I want to further explore this line of thinking by considering some of its social implications, what it says, that is, about how we should regard others—about our ethics. In other words, if it is true that the apex of human experience is every individual being free to achieve her or his full potential, then what kind of social mores, laws, institutions, and systems must be in place to help assure this can happen?

This question is of vital significance because our society currently seems designed to do just the opposite, to rob individuals of their uniqueness in the name of normality, predictability, control, and maintaining the status quo. Being ourselves is encouraged informally, at best, if we are lucky enough to have supportive caregivers and peers who allow us to remain true to ourselves despite all the pressures to conform to cultural expectations. As Sigmund Freud realized long ago, “...every individual is virtually an enemy of civilization,”¹ and, “civilization has to be defended against the individual, and its regulations, institutions and commands are directed to that task.”²

This notion, that society versus the individual, has been repeated by many psychologists since Freud. They see it as the basic psychological tension that defines the human condition. “The two greatest yearnings of human life...,” Robert Keagan says, “may be the yearning for inclusion (to be welcomed in, next to, held, connected with, a part of) and the yearning for distinctness (to be autonomous, independent, to experience my own agency, the self chosenness of my purposes).”³ Erich Fromm characterized it as the troubling choice between *freedom and belonging* because it seems nearly impossible to have both; to be both free and included, authentic and accepted, different and appreciated, true and embraced.

Fromm suggested that in most cases we choose belonging over freedom and authenticity because we are terrified of being left out and alone. As much as we say and think we cherish the idea of freedom, we are more likely to give it up in the name of social security and inclusion. And if so many are willing to give up their own freedom, why should any of them give a second thought about taking it away from others? We wave our flags and utter

¹ Freud, Sigmund, *The Future of an Illusion*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, NY, 1961, 1989, p. 6.

² Ibid., p. 7.

³ Keagan, Robert, *The Evolving Self*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1982, p. 142.

"freedom" with deep reverence, responding to its ring like Pavlov's salivating dogs. Yet, in practice, Freud said, "The liberty of the individual is not a benefit of culture."⁴ Society can't stomach people being free. I've personally been reminded numerous times in my life, for instance, that others fought for my freedom of speech and that I should, therefore, learn to keep my damn mouth shut.

This explains why, in Fromm's words, "It almost seems that 'original' decision is a comparatively rare phenomenon in [our] society which supposedly makes individual decision the cornerstone of its existence."⁵ For there's almost nothing more difficult for us to bear, he said, "than the feeling of not being identified with a larger group."⁶ This isn't so just because we want to be loved, but because we want to be safe and secure, we want, we need, to be included in the benefits of society, to be treated as equals, to have access to quality healthcare, good paying jobs, safe neighborhoods, excellent schools, and so on—benefits that aren't easily accessible to those who look or act differently, those who are the wrong color, the wrong religion, are from the wrong place, or have the wrong gender or sexuality, and so on. So, we often hide who we really are, even from ourselves, to fit in, just to make certain we can feed and shelter and provide for us and our families. "We have become automatons who live under the illusion of being self-willing individuals,"⁷ Fromm said, "under the illusion that [we know] what [we want], while [we] actually [want what we're] *supposed* to want."⁸

This problem—this, "task of finding some [satisfying] solution between these individual claims and those of the civilized community," as Freud puts it—is so ubiquitous and profound, that he wondered if, in his words, "the conflict will prove irreconcilable."⁹ Is it even possible to fashion a society, to build a world, in which individuals can be both free and belong? Is it possible to erect "regulations, institutions and commands" directed to the task of truly assuring individual liberty rather than forcing everyone to conform to the ways and beliefs of the majority?

When morality is defined in this way, by what everyone else is doing, as it often is, then the answer is *no*, it is not possible to have a free society. So long as the golden rationalization, that it's right because "everybody does it," and, most often, only because "everybody does it," then we cannot have a society where individual expression, where true freedom, is permissible. So long as we continue to fear and despise strangers and their strange ways, and continue to feel justified in detaining and deporting them, of imprisoning and impoverishing them, of demonizing and disenfranchising them, just because they are different and distinct, Muslim not Christian, Mexican not "American," black not white, gay not straight, female not male, poor not rich, then the answer is *no*, we will never have a free society.

⁴ Freud, Sigmund, *Civilization and its Discontents*, Dover Publications Inc., New York, NY, 1930, 1994, p. 27.

⁵ Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, *ibid.* p. 225.

⁶ Fromm, Erich, *Escape from Freedom*, Avon Books, New York, NY, 1941, 1965p. 234.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 279.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 278.

⁹ Freud, Sigmund, *Civilization and its Discontents*, *ibid.* p. 27.

But if it is possible for society to adopt an ethic that encourages individual expression, instead of resenting and oppressing it, what might it look like? I must admit, until very recently I've considered myself a relativist when it comes to morality, meaning, for me, right and wrong ought to be determined on their results and little else. If an action, whether it is lying or telling the truth, theft or charity, breaking the law or keeping it, leads to an outcome that creates more injustice and harm than it does good, then it is wrong. The opposite kind of morality is based on the notion that certain behaviors are always right in any circumstance regardless of the outcome. Even if one lies to conceal the whereabouts of a battered spouse from her abusive husband, or if one steals to provide expensive life-saving medicine for a sick person who can't afford it, or if one breaks an unjust law as an act of civil disobedience, it must be considered immoral. So, rather than attempting to figure out how to respond in every potential situation by narrowing morality down to a rigid set of rules that must always be obeyed, I prefer to consider each situation in light of a few overarching principles, like compassion, justice, and equality (all three of which, ultimately, mean the same thing).

As a philosopher, furthermore, I understand that ultimate truth is unobtainable, which leads me to be suspect of absolutist, puritanical moralities. But, as of late, I have also come to believe relativism also has some negative ramifications, and is itself a kind of cultural censoring that discourages us from saying what we mean and from honestly criticizing the views of others. For if absolute certainty is unobtainable, if all truth, including moral truth, is subjective, in the eye of the beholder, then one truth is as good as any other. The choice to be liberal rather than conservative, a Unitarian Universalist rather than a fundamentalist, a Democrat rather than Republican are arbitrary and meaningless because truth is only in the eye of the beholder (and it is pointless to argue about who is correct since correct doesn't exist).

In his book on the psychology of ethics, Erich Fromm says that "Neurosis itself is, in the last analysis, a symptom of moral failure... in many instances a neurotic symptom is the specific expression of moral conflict..."¹⁰ In other words, being morally conflicted, not knowing what we ought to do, can cause psychological issue for us. Yet, if morality is subjective, or based only upon what the majority arbitrarily decides it is, then there's no reasonable way to resolve such conflict, leading many to settle for moral notions that are inconsistent, unforgiving, extreme, and oversimplified.

Such morality is usually based on external authority, like religion or a supreme leader, that it's considered immoral to question. Since the age of Enlightenment, many have shunned such thinking in favor of reason and realism, believing it possible for human beings to determine the difference between right and wrong on their own. But the result, Fromm says, "is the acceptance of a relativistic position which proposes that value judgements and ethical norms are exclusively matters of taste or arbitrary preference and that no objectively valid statement can be made in this realm."¹¹ In short, the rationalist no longer believes it's

¹⁰ Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, An Owl Book, Henry Holt & Co., New York, NY, 1947, p. viii.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

possible to know the difference between right and wrong, so one person's morality is as good as another and must be respected as such.

But when Fromm wrote his book in 1947, he argued that it is possible for us to make "value judgements as all other judgements derived from reason,"¹² meaning, it is possible for us to be reasonable without being relativistic, and to have confidence our moral views are objectively true without being based on primitive religion or some unquestionable authority. The basis of such morality, he says, is human nature.

That's a scary thought, isn't it? After all, since the advent of human civilization, our "regulations, institutions and commands," everything about our societies, have been directed to the task of convincing us we are born bad, born wrong, born out of control, and that human nature is the problem, not any kind of solution. Whether it's through religion that convinces us we're born in sin and that our desires are innately perverted and cause us to suffer, or through punitive systems of law and order that place stop signs on every corner, patrol our neighborhoods, consume most our wealth, and convince us that to be good citizens we must obey the authorities, our cultural paradigm gives us the innate feeling that human nature is the problem. So, this ancient paradigm not only prevents us from unfolding, from fully expressing who we are as individuals, but from fully unfolding as a species. Thus, to resolve our moral conflict, to determine the difference between right and wrong, we either turn to external authorities to tell us what to do, or we just give up and say, "do what you want," because it's all in the eye of the beholder.

As evolutionary psychologist, Robert Wright points out at the start of his book, *The Moral Animal*, psychology has long decided there's little that is "inherent in human nature,"¹³ nothing about how we behave that's biologically rooted in evolution. "The mind, in this view," he says, "is basically passive, it is a basin into which, as a person matures, the local culture is gradually poured."¹⁴ Psychologists, in particular, he says, especially behaviorists, "have often depicted it as little more than a blank slate... that people tend habitually to do what they are rewarded for doing and not do what they are punished for doing; thus is the formless mind given form."¹⁵

If this is so, then the problem of human society is the same as the problem of the individual, the true nature of both have been suppressed. Just as we have been taught there is nothing about us that is unique, nothing we come into this world with that longs to be expressed; we have been taught human nature itself is whatever we choose to make of it, that there is nothing about it that is innately moral and is longing to be expressed.

Seventy years ago, Fromm complained about what he then called the "relatively recent" divorce of "psychology from ethics,"¹⁶ of considering, that is, the relationship between

¹² Ibid., p. 6.

¹³ Wright, Robert, *The Moral Animal*, Vintage Books, Random House, New York, NY, 1994, p. 5.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Fromm, *ibid.*, p. viii.

human nature and morality. He'd hoped then that his book might help heal this rift before it worsened, but it has only widened between then and now. Yet Robert Wright suggests this trend is finally beginning to change through what he calls a *quiet revolution*. "The view," as he puts it, "of human nature—as something that barely exists, and doesn't much matter..."¹⁷ is being rethought by "A group of mainly young scholars [who] have challenged the worldview of their elders."¹⁸ This new generation of "Darwinian anthropologists, evolutionary psychologists, [and] evolutionary psychiatrists,"¹⁹ would agree with what Fromm was arguing seven decades ago, that humanity is "the moral animal," that there is something innately moral about us that it is not to be feared and suppressed, but understood and demonstrated.

For Fromm, in particular, human nature and its morality is healthy and positive. "It might seem that the psychoanalyst, who is in a position of observing the tenacity of irrational strivings, would take a pessimistic view with regard to [humanity's] ability to govern [itself] and to free [itself] from the bondage of irrational passions,"²⁰ he said, but during his work he was far more impressed by the opposite, "by the strengths and strivings for happiness and health,"²¹ that are part of our natural equipment, and was more surprised, in his words, "that most people are relatively healthy in spite of the many adverse influences they are exposed to."²² Fromm would have agreed with Archbishop Oscar Romero insistence that, "No child is born evil... We have all been born for goodness: no one is born with inclinations to kidnap, no one is born with inclinations to be a criminal, no one is born to be a torturer, no one is born to be a murderer. We have all been born to be good, to love one another, to understand one another."²³

So, what might the world look like if, instead of suppressing human nature, or denying that it even exists, we were to let it loose and allow it to unfold as the only means for human society to achieve its full potential? Imagine a society this is fundamentally grounded in the principle we touched upon last week, the notion that every individual is born with a unique purpose and personality striving to express itself. If this were the point of human society, to do whatever we must to empower individuals to achieve their fullest potential, and if all our "regulations, institutions and commands" were directed to this task, instead of to the task of defending society against the individual, how incredibly different our world would become.

Yet the authoritarian ethic we're now under claims that "To be 'virtuous,'" as Fromm puts it, "signifies self-denial and obedience, suppression of individuality rather than its fullest realization."²⁴ But if we reimagined morality, or even went back to Protagoras' ancient idea that, "Man is the measure of all things," then we could base all our moral decisions on the

¹⁷ Wright, *ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Fromm, *ibid.*, p. x.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Romero, Oscar, *The Violence of Love*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1987, 2007, p. 65f.

²⁴ Fromm, *ibid.* p. 13.

objective goal of empowering individuals to achieve their fullest potential. "*Materially*, it is based on the principle that 'good' is what is good for [humanity] and 'evil' what is detrimental to humanity," he says, "*the sole criterion of ethical value being [human] welfare.*"²⁵

Such a morality could not be egotistical since, again, it must consider the needs of all people. Greed and inequality cannot work in a society seeking the welfare and fulfillment of everyone. Nor can it be nationalistic or provincial, or racist, or sexist, or elitist in any way, since the wellbeing and growth of every person is its primary goal. Under such an ethic we don't concern ourselves with national sovereignty, but with human sovereignty, making borders and walls meaningless since, again, the sole criterion of our morality is human welfare, not just American welfare, or male welfare, or white welfare, or rich welfare. Nor can our humanistic morality be anthropocentric, only concerning itself with human welfare to the detriment of other species and to life on Earth, because, as Fromm says, "[human] purpose cannot be fulfilled in a state of unrelatedness to world..."²⁶ "Love," he says, "is not a higher power which descends upon [humanity] nor a duty which is imposed upon [us]; it is [our] own power by which [we relate ourselves] to the world and make it truly [ours]."²⁷ Thus, by honoring human nature we embrace our connection to all of nature, to our place in the world, and to our responsibility to care for all of life.

The old paradigm, the lie about human nature, the lie about individuality, claims we are greedy, unloving creatures who can't be trusted to express ourselves in ways that are compassionate. It claims we need law and order and puritanical religion to keep our innate savagery from creating chaos and destruction. It claims we must suppress our instincts and desires to do the right thing. How's that been working so far?

Today I'm proposing a new paradigm, a new way of being together and of being in the world that liberates the innate humanity in each one of us so our society itself becomes more humane, reflected in our criminal justice system, in our healthcare systems, in our schools and neighborhoods, in the way we do business, and distribute wealth, and how treat people from other places, and take care of our environment. Today I'm proposing a morality that doesn't require us to obey someone else's arbitrary rules, but finally frees us to do what, deep down we've always know we must do, love one another.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 14.

²⁷ Ibid.