
Prof. Erich Fromm (1966) – The Automaton Citizen & Human Rights

Description

See also: cognitive-liberty.online/erich-fromm-disobedience-a-moral-or-psychological-problem-1962/

Transcript

The problem of human rights is usually dealt well by political scientists, economists or philosophers, but rarely by psychologists, and so I was very delighted to be invited to talk about the problem of human rights from a clinical stand point of psychology. We know more or less what the standpoints of the political scientists are. They would say a hope that the human right is the right of every citizen to express himself freely without any fear of reprisals or even of indirect pressures against him, and the right to participate actively in the process of decision making. That's how a political scientist would define human rights in a democratic society.

An economist would define human rights as a right of everybody to have a sufficient material basis to live a dignified human life. And there are some economists – in my opinion unfortunately only a minority – who will see the unconditional right of everyone to have a sufficient material basis for a dignified life, that is to say, that a man has the same right which a dog has – to live, and not to starve. And a philosopher would probably define the human rights – if he is a Kantian – in the sense of saying that the fundamental human right of man is to be an end of himself and not to be used as a means; not as a means by any other man nor by any organisation including the sovereign state.

But as a psychologist we might ask why all these definitions of human rights are correct, and even if they were all fulfilled, do they truly guarantee all human rights, especially if we stress „human“, that is to say the right of each man to unfold as an individual and as a human being, assuming for example that every body has a right to voice his opinion. But what value has this right if he has no opinion, or rather, if he is under the illusion of having opinions, but actually he is only repeating what the newspapers write for him. Or, even if everybody were well fed – and in the world we are very far from this, indeed.

But can it not be that we will have a society of well fed automatons or things which operate as an appendix to the machines? And even if no man were exploited by any other man, that is to say even if we were not made a means to the ends of another man, could it not be made a means to the state, to the economic system, or could he not be made a means to his own ends which are not human ends, to his own ambition, to his own greed, or to put it differently: could it not be that man might exploit himself, even though he is not exploited by other man?

I believe that while the three human rights mentioned so far are necessary conditions of human rights, they are not sufficient conditions for what we call human rights. And one has to add another one: a condition which one could formulate in many ways I would like to formulate it by saying it is a right to be oneself. And I believe that in this sphere of the right to be oneself the clinician can make some contributions. Naturally the question is what does it mean to be oneself, and I should like to mention a few aspects of this problem as it seems to me essential. To be oneself I would believe in the first place means to be a person and not a thing. Of course, we are things in a physiological way only when we are corpses. But in a more subtle spiritual way we can become things while we are still physiologically alive. We live indeed in a society – and by that I mean western industrialized society, quite regardless

of the political system – which creates a new type of man, a type of man, whom one could call the homo consumens, the consumer man, the man for whom all things are articles of consumption, whether it is liqueur and cigarettes, or books and lectures, or love and sex. Everything is an article of consumption, he becomes a consumer, and – more than that – he devotes his life to producing things and consuming things, and in this process he transforms himself into a thing. Philosophers of the 19th century have called this process sometimes reification – from Latin res and facere, to make oneself into a thing. Indeed, man has been called the homo faber the producing man, and undoubtedly he is still that, although with the second industrial revolution his method of producing has changed a great deal. He has been called the homo sapiens, indeed sometimes I have doubts whether that definition still is true, because by homo sapiens I think one means an animal which uses his intelligence for the purpose of survival. If one sees that today men do not seem to use their intelligence for the purpose of survival but rather for the preparation of mass destruction, then indeed one may have some doubts to what extent the definition of homo sapiens still is true. But what we see in the industrialized society is, that aside from being homo faber, aside from still being homo sapiens, hopefully man has become a homo consumens and he has become – or is becoming – more and more a thing. Now the clinical problem here is to study this process of reification, this process of a person who has an illusion of being a person and yet is really not much more than what you might call a mechanism. This is a subject matter for intense psychological investigation; this is not a philosophical matter only, or a social matter, or a religious matter, this is something which one can study with the present methods of psychology and psychiatry in a very empirical clinical way.

And I suggest that it should be studied because it is one of the most important problems which go on in the modern world. Another aspect of saying what is it to be oneself would be to say perhaps it is to overcome the tremendous alienation which exists in modern man, alienation from one's work, from one's fellowman and from oneself. The word 'alienation' has already become quite popular in the last few years, so many of you are familiar with the term which goes back to Hegel, and in fact it goes back earlier, but I should like for those who are not familiar with it to define it in as brief the way as possible – I hope at the same time somewhat understandably – by alienation one refers to the fact that a man does not experience his own powers, his power of thought, his power of love as his own, that he transfers all these powers to something outside, to a leader, to the state, to society, to an organization, and that he is in touch with his own powers only by the worship of these institutions or leaders or personalities to whom he has transferred his powers. The richer and more powerful they are, the poorer he is as an individual. This phenomenon was first described as a religious alienation by the prophets of the Old Testament in the concept of idolatry. When they speak of the idols by saying: he has eyes and does not see, he has ears and he does not hear, they point exactly to the fact that man bows down to the work of his own hands. He feels powerless and impotent and does not recognize that he is the one who has created these idols whom he now fears, whom he asks to help him when they are nothing but the production or the product of his own – sometimes – hands when it is an idol of carved wood or sometimes merely his imagination. In the modern world there is not only a great deal of idolatry, whether it is in religious or in non-religious terms, the worship of the state, the worship of production, the worship of leaders, but in general we can say that we have lost control over the very circumstances which are our own creation. These stand up above and against us and we do not seem to be able to control the very circumstances and things which we have created. This is the essence of the concept of alienation, not only in the religious but also in the general social sense, and there is no more drastic example for this powerlessness of modern man toward the creation of his hands than our nuclear weapons. There they are the result of the finest thought and effort of mankind and yet man finds it extremely difficult to control this work of his hands, and they have become stronger than he. He

feels powerless in comparison with that which in fact is his own creation. As Emerson has once put it – and that was already in the 19th century – things are in the saddle and ride man. That is a very good description of the concept of alienation. Now again I would say this is a problem which can be studied clinically from a psy-chological and psychiatric standpoint, and a few beginnings have already been made to study it. Mostly this problem has been dealt with by philosophers and by sociologists, but the phenomenon of alienation is not just a philosophical concept, it is a very real human phenomenon which can be understood only if one understands the whole per-sonality, if one understands the processes which are involved in the experience of alien-ation. And, of course, it's particularly important that this is studied from the standpoint of a theory which under stands the importance of unconscious phenomena, because it's the very nature of alienation that it is not conscious and that if one does not understand and investigate unconscious phenomena one does not understand alienation. Let me mention a third aspect of what it seems to me is important to be a person, and that is to have a sense of identity, to be able to say „I“ in a meaningful and authen-tic way, rather than to feel as the ONE, as Heidegger has originally formulated it, as ONE, the ONE of the mass, as a coin which bears the same stamp as all other coins and yet has the illusion to be entirely different from all other coins.

This phenomenon of lack of identity has been described perhaps most clearly also already in the 19th century where some remarkable people have seen what will become of man more clearly than man sees it when he has become it. The one I'm referring too now is Ibsen and his Peer Gynt. Peer Gynt is a normal man, he is successful, he is a trader, he follows his self-interest, only to discover at the end of his life that he never was himself, that he has no self, that he has no identity, that he is – in order to use Ib-sens symbol – an onion which one can peel and peel and peel and there is no kernel. And in that point Peer Gynt is ceased by the horror of the nothing, by the horror of sensing that he is not he, and he would rather be burned in the fires of hell than to re-turn to the melting pots, in the awareness that there is no sense of his own identity. A modern writer, Kafka, has described the same phenomenon in The Trial, which I am sure most of you know. There too K. is a perfectly normal man, he has no problems, except he has that long dream which fills the book of Kafka, The Trial. He is perfectly normal and yet he is profoundly sick but he is not aware of it, except in the dream or in the symbolic novel which Kafka writes about it. Now again it has to be said that our lack of sense of identity leads to another phe-nomenon and that is the obsessional need to conform with everybody else. Naturally, if I do not know who I am than I have to join the herd in order to be sure that I am somebody, that I am at least like the rest, that I have a place somewhere, that I am not completely disoriented. If I have a strongly developed sense of „I“ I do not need to have an obsessional need to be a part of the herd, because my role in the world is given by my own experience of „I“. As most of you know, the problem of identity has be-come the study among a number of psychologists and psychoanalysts in recent years, perhaps the best known of them in this field has been Prof. Erikson, but again I believe a great deal more can be done to study the problem of identity in modern man. And I come now to a fourth aspect of being a person, an aspect which I should like to describe by saying to be a person requires not to be the prisoner of unconscious forces which drive one. To be free in a deeper than the merely political sense, to make the unconscious conscious at least to a larger extent, to be aware or, as Freud put it, where there is „I“ there shall be Ego. Or you might even still put it in a simpler form, and that is simply to say to see the reality inside me and the reality outside of myself. Up to all there is no such thing as the unconscious as a place, there is only a function, I am either conscious or I am unconscious of certain experiences, of certain things which I sense inside of myself or outside of myself. That really means I either see or I don't see, I am blind, and to make the unconscious conscious simply means to be more in touch with the reality inside of myself or outside of myself. After all let us not forget, most of what is real is not conscious, and most of what is conscious is fiction. We

are not aware that it is a fiction because it is a fiction shared by everybody, and hence people believe the fiction is true, because our whole concept of reality is essentially one based on consensus and not on a critical examination of what is really real. Actually it has been a tendency the thought of the last two or three centuries in science, in philosophy, to get a closer answer to the question what is really real, and not just in a philosophical sense, but what is really real in ones mind in matter, and these are the questions with which psychoanalysis and theoretical physics have occupied them-selves. If man is motivated by his unconscious without his knowledge – and that is what most of us are – we are like the persons in a Greek drama, whose fate is already de-cided, who have no freedom to form their own destiny and to only live under the illu-sion that they have that freedom when in reality everything occurs according to a plot. But it has been from the Hebrew prophets on to our days the tendency of western man as well as of the great religions of the East, especially of Buddhism, to enlarge man's freedom by making him more aware of his own inner realities, of the forces which drive him, and the one who has made the basic discoveries in a more detailed and scientific sense is, of course, Freud. No need here to talk about Freud, I think the thoughts about man will never be the same since Freud wrote his basic works. But naturally, Freud was, like every genius, also a son of his time. In his thinking he was largely determined by a mechanistic materialism which tries to see psychic realities represented mainly by the mechanisms of instincts which Freud saw in a certain sense es-sentially as libido or later as death instinct and life instinct. I believe that by this narrow-ness of his philosophy he was forced very often to restrict the richness of his own dis-coveries, because the frame of reference he had did not permit him to widen it further. But no genius ever has transcended his epoch in a sense that he could foresee what pos-sibilities existed for his own discoveries, even half a century later. It is true, that fifty years ago sexual desires were – certainly in the middle class, never in the upper class – very much repressed. That was a characteristic of the Victorian age. But I think there is a rather wide-spread agreement that today sexual desires and fantasies are not so re pressed anymore; some of us may even wish they were a little bit more repressed. Sex has become, like everything else, an article of consumption, in fact a very accessible and cheap one. But there are other things in man of today which are re-pressed, they have a very different nature. What is repressed today is an enormous bor-der most of us have with life. In fact that most of us are capable to listen to television for hours is the best proof how bored we must be, if we accept this food, voluntarily. What is repressed is a deep sense of isolation, of loneliness, what is repressed is an intense anxiety, an anxiety which has led to support to call our century the century of anxiety. What is repressed is a sense of inner emptiness, is a sense of lacking any guid-ance about the meaning of life, a belief in order to apply the basic discoveries of Freud. To the promise of man today we need to transcend his frame of reference of what is re-pressed, what is the unconscious, and we need to emphasize more the years done also years done it to the social character of that which is conscious and that which is re-pressed. To be a little bit more specific about what I have meant here with a social character, I should like to say that all these phenomena, the boredom, the isolation, the anxiety, the powerlessness, are produced by our way of life. They are results of the industrial so-ciety as it is constituted. Why this is so certainly is not a topic which I could deal with within this lecture, it is also a topic to which certainly I don't have the answers, but it is a topic which should be studied by many psychologists, perhaps also in cooperation with sociologists. To understand why this society in which we live produces these emo-tional experiences, it is easier to say why they have to be repressed. Because if we were aware of our anxiety, of our sense of isolation, of our sense of impotence, if we were aware of it, we could hardly go on functioning as the society expects us to function. In fact there I would think that even if for one week you would stop all television, radio, games and conversation you would have probably hundred thousands of nervous break-downs, or, at least you would have suddenly people being very aware of all these things which are usually repressed. The reason why people are not aware of them lies to a larger extent in this phe-nomenon

that the very society which produces these experiences also produces the compensations which permit to keep them repressed. That is to say essentially our entertainment industry and our consumption culture. By the process of being the perfect consumer man saves himself from the awareness of his anxiety. To the clinician this is by no means something surprising, because we know that many people who have an intense anxiety without being aware of it overeat or have developed a habit of compulsive buying. By doing this they compensate the anxiety in such a way that they protect themselves from being aware of it. Now you may ask: would it be advisable that these unconscious experiences should become conscious? Should we be aware of our anxiety, of our border? Well, the answer to this question depends where you stand. If your main interest is the social 'status quo' then you better see to it that these experiences do not become conscious, because if they do become conscious they would lead some people to despair, but many other people to demand changes, to look for goals, for meaning of life, for spiritual ends which would make life more meaningful and which would relieve them from their despair. But that would also require some social changes, and if you only think of the damage which our advertising industry does to man psychologically, then even a simple demand which would be a demand in the name of man's sanity, to stop our method of advertising would already encounter very massive resistance, and I don't mean the resistance the psychoanalysts speak of, but the resistance of a very powerful industry, and that is not an easy thing. But if you are concerned with the development of man as being more important than the existing social status quo, then indeed I think you would be in favor of saying what is hidden, because it is the only way to end the way of life which, if it continues, will end in a human automaton, who has become entirely a means and not an end in himself anymore. So if you have this aim then the question is how could that which is unconscious in most people become conscious. I think we could use here the word social unconscious. There are many things which are conscious individually, by individual factors, of repression, of this sort and the other. But I would say most of what is unconscious is precisely not the memory of what happened to be in my fourth year, in my third year, or a little later. But most of what is unconscious is precisely that which society forces to be unconscious, because why it produces certain experiences it must prohibit and inhibit them to become conscious. Well, one answer would be: should everybody be analyzed. Well, I am afraid then psychoanalysts would have such an excellent business that it would be very dangerous for the profession, it has already been a little bit too dangerous that psychoanalysis became so fashionable in the last 20 years. And besides that, it would require a material wealth which is far from what we can visualize. But I don't think it would be necessary either. I think in the first place becoming and getting in touch with the realities inside of myself and outside of myself, that is to say to see, to be in communication with what I sense without being aware of it, requires first of all a social atmosphere which is free from fear, free from fear of any kind, free from any threat, but, more than that, in which dissent is not discouraged, is encouraged, is furthered. And that is not so much a matter of the law, but this is the matter of the social atmosphere of the subtlety of practices which go on, to what extent a man dares to say or even dares to think what is inconvenient in a given situation. I think that the awareness of the social unconscious depends first of all in a great deal more freedom for dissent in a subtle and often indirect way than even a country like the United States has now. It involves a second thing – and that is a critical attitude towards society and its ideologies: if I am not critical towards social ideologies, if I am naive in believing that what the majority says is true, and what the majority of the opponent whoever he is at the moment says is false, then, of course, I am caught completely in the thoughts schemata of my own group, then I think what everybody else thinks and cannot be aware of anything which is in contrast to the pattern of thought which is universally accepted, or at least accepted by the majority. To be in touch with one's own inner reality requires to be of a critical mind, critical of oneself and critical of the facts which one sees. Let me give you one example for this: that is the trial against a former Nazi, Eichmann, which you will remember a few years

ago in Jerusalem. Well, one can feel nothing but indignation about this man, but if one is in touch with ones own uncon-scious reality I think one would have to admit that in all of us there is a piece of Eichmann, and if you ask why, on what basis do I say this, then I would ask you whether you have lost your appetite when you read that in India people were starving, or whether you have gone eating. As soon as you have not lost your appetite when you knew other people were starving, then your heart has hardened, and in principle you have done the same which Eichmann did. I don't think that if we really are in touch with the reality, the inner reality of our-selves, that there is any crime or perhaps any virtue which we cannot discover in our-selves. We shut ourselves up from the awareness of our inner reality, we project the evil to our opponents and enemies and believe that the good is in ourselves, individually, nationally and group-wise in general. But if you can really see that everyone of us carries all of humanity, the good and the evil, within himself then indeed it is very hard to be a fanatic, then indeed it's very hard to be a judge, then indeed it would follow a deep understanding, if not love, of your fellowman, which is part of being truly a person. The question is whether the clinician can help in this process. And I think that de-pends on what he wants. If he is concerned with man more than – as I said before – with the status quo of his own society, then I think he will want to help in this process. And then he will want to concern himself with the phenomenon which I would call the "pathology of normality". That is to say the pathology of the normal man. I give us an example: Peer Gynt and Kafka's K., who both are normal men who are very sick. And perhaps I could mention – as the opposite example – Hamlet, who is a man who really saw reality and there fore had to appear crazy. Anyone who really sees reality, who sees what really is really real will appear to the person who lives under the illusion that the world is alright as a slightly crazy person, sometimes it might be, but not necessarily so. What I suggest is that if the clinical psychologist or the social psychiatrist wants to help in the process that man becomes a person, then he must study much more the pa-thology of normality than has been done so far. Indeed we have learned a great deal from the study of individual pathology but I think we have become – and that is a pro-fessional sickness or one-sidedness which is quite understandable – too impressed with individual pathology and too little impressed with social pathology, precisely with the pathology of what is called normal. If we were looking at ourselves, a modern industri-alized society, from one of those 'flying saucers' some people believe in, or from an-other planet, I think we would consider Western mankind at the moment rather is one of insanity, of people playing with self-destruction when they have the chance of build-ing a life for the first time in the history which could lead to the development of all powers, human powers of man. And if the clinician wants to help in this, he naturally must begin with himself, to become critical, not only of individual pathology, not only of seeing that a man who behaves in a peculiar way is probably suffering from this or that sickness, but critical pre-cisely of the normality of his own society. And that means perhaps to have little cour-age, it means also to have compassion with man, and I think that anyone who has com-compassion with man can not be blind toward the deep inner suffering, an increasing suffer-ing, which goes on under the surface of prosperity and fun and well being. To make some concluding remarks to these observations I would say that the hu-man right to be oneself requires in the first place freedom from fear, fear of war, pov-erty and persecution and discrimination of any type. Secondly it re quires to change the pattern of the consumer man and to set new goals in which man finds a meaning in life in which he is active, productive, active and productive here in the sense of Aristotle and Spinoza and not in the sense of being busy, and in which man becomes aware of that which is his own social unconscious, that is to say those experiences which are repressed but so widely that nobody is aware of the fact of repression. I believe that the psychia-trist and the clinical psychologist have an important task, that is, not to be over-impressed by individual sickness but to think of man as a total being and of applying their basic findings to the pathology of normality which threatens to undermine the very rights

which we are so proud of having achieved.

Category

1. General

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