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Erich Fromm On the Life and Death

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Abstract: ***Erich Fromm has a significant discussion on the relationship between life and death. He comes up with a mode of theory to analyze the problem of life and death. Whether one mainly experiences original self or pseudo self, is the key to realizing the situation of one utilize the way of facing this problem. The original self implies unfolding one's nature and life, while the pseudo self implies suppressing one's potentialities. One should develop his own tendency of productive orientation if he wants to correctly understand the relationship between life and death.***

Key words: *Life and death; Original self and pseudo self; Productive orientation and unproductive orientation*

Introduction

The problem of life and death is a permanent issue for human. There are many philosophers who have given various answers to this problem. However, Erich Fromm, who is a Marxist Freudian, has come up with a lot of significant idea related to this problem. His viewpoints towards this issue has not received enough attention in academia. Even though there are many studies concerned about his ethics and humanistic philosophy, there is not sufficient of research on his view towards the problem of life and death. This study makes a discussion on what he philosophically think about life and death and what valuable things we can learn from his thoughts. Following discussion involves in two important questions: Firstly, what is nature of life and death? Secondly, How can a man achieve the good death? This paper focuses on these questions and tries to give some reasonable arguments.

The Nature of Life and Death

The Original Self and The Pseudo Self

When it comes to the nature of life and death, it is necessary to explain what the nature of life and death means in this study. The relationship between life and death implies a kind of tense and contradictory relation. This study is not to think of them as separate. Instead, life and death are the integrity. A man is living in the situation where he can feel this tense condition. His life goes as time goes by. He is actually approaching to the death, even though he can not realize it by the time he is old enough. The life is developing as the death is approaching. Every single man has to be confronted with this tense situation every day. Then, This has been a significant philosophical problem that a man should find what way to explain this phenomenon and find what means to deal with this challenge. He has to be confronted with this concern because he is a creature that has capacity to thinking and speculating rationally. So, the tense situation resulted from the relationship between life and death has been an important problem for human.

In Chinese academia, there has some scholars who come up with a novel subject: the science of life and death, which means that a subject involves in research on problems of death through philosophical way and scientific way.(Xiaojiang Zheng, 2008) Compared with thanatography, the science of life and death pay more attention on the relationship between the life and death through the philosophical way. So, the problem which this study concerns is based on this text. The nature of life and death means the nature of relationship between life and death which can be found through philosophical viewpoints.

From Erich Fromm's viewpoints, he deems that the problem of life and death is bound to the problem of nature of man. He utilizes his unique humanistic philosophy, which combines Marxism with psychoanalysis, and demonstrates nature of man. He deems that the human situation is so different from other creatures because there is the existential and historical dichotomies in man. Fromm said: "Self-awareness, reason, and imagination have disrupted the 'harmony' which characterizes animal existence."(Erich Fromm, 1947, p. 38) Even though a man is part of nature, he can be aware of himself and out of nature and realize his powerlessness the limitations of his existence. So, from this perspective, human can not escape from a kind of contradiction of himself.

Given that human must face this dichotomy, every single man has to face some kind of existential dichotomy as well. Fromm said: "The most fundamental existential dichotomy is that between life and death."(Ibid, p. 40) The reason why Fromm emphasize this view is that the death is unalterable for man and man is aware of this fact. On the one hand, man wants to develop himself and achieve higher power. On the other hand, man can not escape from the end of his own life. Thus, he can not get rid of this situation until he dies.

From Fromm's perspective, the dichotomy between life and death does not lie in one's physiological death. Instead, it lies in the one's situation of one's own self. Fromm deems that there two kinds of self: the original self and the pseudo self. The original self means one's original feelings and thoughts, while the pseudo self means an agent who actually represents the role a person is supposed to play but who does so under the name of the original self.(1942, p. 175) The original self implies one's vitality and creativity, while the pseudo self implies one's psychological symptom and regression. Even though the pseudo self can bring the sense of existence for a man, it still may result in the resistant anxiety. A man can not feel his original feelings unless he can uncover his original self through some psychoanalytic procedure.

The Real Needs and The False Need

The nature of life and death is concerned about man's needs as well. Fromm said, "Man's life is determined by the inescapable alternative between regression and progression, between return to animal existence and arrival at human existence".(1956, p. 26) Due to this kind of alternative between regression and progression, there are five fundamental needs stemmed from the conditions of existence: relatedness, transcendence, rootedness, sense of identity, the need for a frame of orientation and devotion.

The need of relatedness means that a man has a tendency to unite himself with others. He is unconsciously willing to make some connection with others. In other words, to unite with other living beings, and to be related to them are imperative needs for a man. However, there are several ways of meeting this demand for a

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man. He can be submitted to a person or a powerful object so that he can feel that he has become a part of this object. Then, he may feel satisfied of his demand on relatedness. Meanwhile, he can make others become a part of himself and he can control what he wants. This is another way to eliminate the feeling of isolatedness. From Fromm's perspectives, these two ways of overcoming separateness fail to bring about the very satisfaction. Instead, they must bring about suffering and make people become involved in anxiety. Fromm calls this as symbiotic nature of relatedness.(Ibid, p. 29) He thinks that this symbiotic situation stemmed from the pseudo self. In other words, the pseudo self substitute for the original self which should be in charge of meeting the need of relatedness. Thus, pseudo self creates false needs of becoming a part of a powerful object and making others a part of itself.

Actually, the nature of life and death lies in the relationship between real self and pseudo self. If a man develops his real self and tries to meet the real needs through various ways, he may unfold his own life and realize his full potential. On the contrary, if a man is bound by pseudo self, he may lost his own potential. Even though one who has developed his own pseudo self can biologically live consistently, his potential has been getting lost. He cannot be a man who unfolds his own nature. His life may be meaningless in this condition. Therefore, the nature of life and death is bound to be related to the real self, pseudo self, real needs and false needs. The relationship between life and death lies in the relationship between real self and pseudo self, and the relationship between real needs and false needs.

The Way of Facing to The Life and Death

Two Orientations of Man

The similar situation sees on the need of transcendence, rootedness, sense of identity, and on the need for a frame of orientation and devotion as well. Due to different situations stemmed from real self or pseudo self, those needs may be meeted by some alternative ways.

For instance, the need of transcendence implies human has the potential to create something and unfold his own nature so that he can transcend his conditions as an animal. Fromm said, "But being endowed with reason and imagination, he cannot be content with the passive role of the creature, with the role of dice cast out of a cup. He is driven by the urge to transcend the role of the creature, the accidentalness and passivity of his existence, by becoming a 'creator'."(Ibid, p. 35)

However, man can utilize some destructive ways to realize this aim if he is bound by pseudo self. This can bring about suffering, even though this can make human feel powerful at this stage.

So, Fromm comes up with two key concepts which is used to analyze the way of facing the problem of life and death. He deems that there are two orientations of man which imply the situation of human existence. One of orientation is the productive orientation, which means that a man experiences himself as the embodiment of his powers. A man who has this orientation feels himself one with his powers and at the same time that they are not masked and alienated from him. Fromm said, "Productiveness is man's ability to use his powers and to realize the potentialities inherent in him." (1947, p. 73)

Productiveness sees in some aspects of human existence. Firstly, it involves in one's power of reason. To utilize this kind of power, one can approach to the truth and realize the essence of things, so that one can feel his own power and develop his own self. Secondly, it involves one's power of love. Love is a kind of strong emotion, which is regarded as the means of uniting one person with another. Thirdly, it is related to one's power of imagination, which represents one's potential to create things. In short, these characteristics see in the productiveness in this text.

The other orientation is called as the nonproductive orientation. This orientation is concerned about several characteristics. Firstly, Fromm mentions the Receptive Orientation as one of main characteristics of nonproductive orientation. (Ibid, p. 55) He said, "In the receptive orientation a person feels "the source of all good" to be outside, and he believes that the only way to get what he wants----be it something material, be it affection, love, knowledge, pleasure----is to receive it from that outside source." (Ibid, p. 55) Secondly, the Exploitative Orientation means that one has the tendency toward controlling others and exploiting anybody. Fromm describe this orientation that "they are satisfied only with things they can take away from others, they tend to overrate what others have and underrate what is theirs". (Ibid) Thirdly, the hoarding orientation implies that a man has a lack of faith in anything new they might get from the outside world so that his security is based on hoarding and saving, while he could feel afraid of spending. Fromm said, "they have surrounded themselves, as it were, by a protective wall, and their main aim is to bring as much as possible into this fortified position and to let as little as possible out of it". (Ibid, p. 58) At last, there is an orientation named "The Marketing Orientation", which developed as a dominant one only in the modern era. One could unconsciously regard some characteristics of his own personality as commodities, and could feel anxious about whether he can "put across" his own personality. Fromm said, "if it were enough for the purpose of making a living to rely on what one knows and what one can do, one's self-esteem would be in proportion to one's capacities, that is, to one's use value; but since success depends largely on how sells ones personality, one experiences oneself as a commodity or rather simultaneously as the seller and the commodity to be sold". (Ibid, p. 62)

According to these two kinds of orientation of man, there are two ways of facing the life and death for a man. On the one hand, a man who cultivates his tendency of productive orientation, he could unfold his own potentialities sufficiently. So, he may not be too afraid of approaching death even though he can realize this end of his life. On the other hand, a man who has tendency of nonproductive orientation, his potentialities could be suppressed even though he can biologically live well. Therefore, from Fromm's perspective, it is significant to cultivate one's tendency of productive orientation. This is the key point of Fromm's viewpoint of relationship between the life and death.

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