

To have or to be? Examining Erich Fromm's Inquiry of the Person in the Global Age

Christine Carmela R. Ramos, Ph.D.

Abstract— The global age presents us with many changes e.g. technology. These changes however present an imbalance. The constant need to have, led to consumerism as well as the seeming lack of initiative to choose silence and reflect. As the essence of being is overcome, this paper aims to explore both the being and having modes of existence. It envisions a society where the essence of being will be nourished as opposed to the current emphasis of the inauthentic mode.

Keywords— Being, Being mode, Global age, Having mode

I. INTRODUCTION

Let us begin this section by quoting Daisetz Suzuki [6], who popularized Zen for Western audience.

Basho (1644-1994), a great Japanese poet of the seventeenth century once composed seventeen-syllable poem or a haiku or hokku. It runs into like this:

When I look carefully
I see the nazuna blooming
By the hedge!

Yoku nireba
Nazuna hana saku
Kakine kana.

According to the story, Basho was walking along a country road when he noticed something rather neglected by the hedge. As he approached closer, he found it was no less than a wild plant, insignificant and generally unnoticed by passerby. The feeling running through the seventeen syllables with an exclamation mark is also noticeable. Basho discovered an inconspicuous, almost negligible plant blooming by the old dilapidated hedge along a remote country road, so innocently, so unpretentiously, not all desiring to be noticed by anybody. This is the East.

As a nature poet, Basho loves nature and feels every pulse beating through the veins of nature. Most Westerners are apt to alienate themselves from nature. Similar with the sentiments expressed by Martin Heidegger, Suzuki believes that most Westerners view that nature exists only for the utilization of humanity.

In a similar situation, Suzuki chose a similar theme from the

West as represented by Tennyson. The verse is as follows:

Flower in the crannied wall,
I pluck you out of the crannies; -

Hold you here, root and all, in my hand,
Little flower – but if I could understand

What you are, root and all, and all in all,
I should know what God and man is.

First, Tennyson's plucking the flower and holding it in his hand, "root and all" and looking at it, perhaps intently somehow might be akin to what Basho felt who discovered a nazuna flower by the roadside hedge. Basho does not pluck the flower; only looks at it, absorbed in thought. He feels something in his mind, but does not express it. He lets an exclamation mark say everything he wishes to say. For he has no words to utter, his feelings too deep and has no desire to conceptualize it.

On the other hand, Tennyson is active, analytical. He first plucks the flower, separating the flower from the ground where it belongs. He does not leave the flower alone; does not care for the flower only the satisfaction of curiosity. Basho does not even touch the nazuna. Basho is no more an onlooker but the flower has become conscious of itself and silently, eloquently expressive of itself.

The silence of the East does not mean just to be dumb or remain wordless or speechless. Silence in many cases is as eloquent as being wordy. The West likes verbalism and transforms the word into flesh. Tennyson's individuality stands apart from the flower and does not identify himself with nature.

For Erich Fromm [3] the two poems are not just simply a crystallized realization of the differences between the East and West but rather, the difference is between a society centered on persons and one centered on things. The having orientation characterized Western industrial society, where greed for money, fame and power dominates life. Fromm argues that the problem is that it is not that Westerners cannot fully understand Eastern systems, such as Zen Buddhism, but that modern humanity cannot understand the spirit of a society that is not centered in property and greed.

II. HAVING AND BEING

Influenced by Master Eckhart's concept of Being, Fromm [3] defines having versus being that simply does not appeal to common sense.

First, to have, is a normal function of our life; in order to live we must have things. Moreover, we must have things in order to enjoy them. In our contemporary society, the essence of being is having; that if one has nothing, one is nothing.

Yet the great Masters of living have made alternatives between having and being. The Buddha teaches that we must not crave possessions, including one's own ego, the concept of lasting substance, the craving for one's perfection. Jesus teaches, "Whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall have it. For what is a man advantaged, if he gain the whole world, and lose himself, or be cast away (Luke 9: 24-25)?" To have seems to be a relatively simple concept. For Fromm, the having mode of existence is a relationship to the world of possessing and owning – one in which I want to make everybody and everything, including myself, my property.

In contrast, in the being mode of existence, Fromm means aliveness and authentic relatedness to the world. In contrast to superficiality, the form of being refers to the true nature, the true reality, of a person or a thing. Being, to Eckhart means to be active in the classic sense of the productive expression of one's human powers, not in the modern sense of being busy. Activity to him means, "to go out of oneself", something that flows and flows in itself and beyond itself. Breaking through the mode of having is the condition for all genuine activity: the overcoming of all forms of ego-boundness and craving.

Fromm points that the attitude inherent in consumerism is that of swallowing the whole world. The consumer is the eternal suckling crying for the bottle. To consume is one form of having and perhaps the most important one for today's affluent industrial societies. Consuming requires one to consume ever more. Modern consumers may identify themselves by the formula: I am = what I have and what I consume.

While the having persons rely on what they have, the being persons rely on the fact that they are, that they are alive and that something new will be born if only they have the courage to let go and to respond [3].

III. THE HAVING MODE

In a deeper analysis, For Fromm, to acquire, to own, and to make profits are sacred and unalienable rights of the individual in the industrial society. Max Stirner gives a brilliant picture of the bourgeois obsession with property. Persons are transformed into things; their relations to each other assume the character of ownership. Since the nineteenth century, "Individualism," which in its positive sense means liberation from social chains means "self-ownership".

Today, consumerism emphasized "throw-away" buying, eager to dispose the old and buy the latest model. Perhaps, the most striking example today is the acquisition of cell phones. Our life seems to be built around our cell phones. Those who

have cell phones consider the gadget like a vital necessity; to those who don't own a cell phone yet, cell phones symbolize happiness. Yet, this relationship with our cell phone is short-lived as we shop for a new one.

First, there is an element of depersonalization in the owner's relationship to the cell phone. The cell phone is a status symbol, an extension of power, and an ego builder. Having acquired a cell phone, the owner has actually acquired a new piece of ego. Fromm [3] argues that ideas and beliefs could also become property.

Another instance is owning a car. The car promised efficiency, mobility and more individual autonomy [2]. However, with efficiency come noise, pollution and urban dislocation. Here we should at least recognize that choices must be made. As such, full ethical accounting must take account of eudemonistic concerns or what it takes to be happy.

The nature of having mode follows from the nature of private property. For Fromm, the having mode exclude others; it transforms everybody and everything into something dead and subject to another's power. In other words, greed is the natural outcome of the having orientation. In contrast to physiological needs such as hunger, mental greed (all greed is mental) has no satiation point for its consummation does not fill the inner emptiness, boredom, loneliness and depression it is meant to overcome [3].

The sentence, "I have something," expresses the relation between the subject and the object. In the having mode, there is no alive relationship between me and what I have. It and I have become things, and I have it, because I have the force to make it mine. Ironically, it has me because my sense of identity rests upon having it (and as many things as possible.) The having mode of existence is not established by an alive, productive process between subject and object; it makes things of both object and subject. The relationship is one of deadness, not aliveness.

The having mode of existence, the attitude centered on property and profit, necessarily produces the desire – the need for power. To control other living human beings we need to use power to break their resistance. To maintain control over private property we need to use power to protect it from those who would take it from us because they, like us, can never have enough. In the having mode, one's happiness lies in one's superiority over others, in one's power, and in the last analysis, in one's capacity to conquer.

Having-centered persons want to have the person they like or admire. Apparently, for Fromm [3], this can be seen in relations between parents and their children, between teachers and students, between friends. Predominantly "having" relationships are heavy, burdened, filled with conflicts and jealousies.

Fromm [3] differentiates existential having from characterological having. In the former, human existence requires that we have, keep, take care of. This form of having may be called existential having because it is rooted in human existence. In contrast to the characterological having that is passionate drive to retain and keep that is not innate, but that has developed as the result of the impact of social conditions on

the human species as it is biologically given. Existential having is not in conflict with being, while characterological having necessarily is.

IV. THE BEING MODE

Being refers to experience. The mode of being has as its prerequisites independence, freedom and the presence of critical reason. Being, similar with the experience of Basho with the *nazuna*, is indescribable in words and is communicable only by sharing my experience. In the structure of having, the dead word rules; in the structure of being, the alive and inexpressible experience rules. Fromm [3] argues that “to be” requires giving up one’s egocentricity and selfishness, or making oneself empty and poor. The following narration could perhaps further explain the being mode.

Kyogen was a disciple of Hyakujo. Kyogen went to Yisan, a senior disciple of Hyakujo. Yisan to Kyogen: I am told that you have been studying under my late master and that you have a remarkable intelligence. You may have had an insight into the truth of Zen. Let me have your views as to the reason of birth and death: that is, as to your own being before your parents had given birth to you.

Kyogen, not knowing how to reply, retired in his own room and take stock of his notes of the sermons given by their late master. He returned to Yisan and implored to be taught in the faith of Zen. Yisan replied, “I have nothing to impart to you. Besides, whatever I can tell you is my own and can never be yours.”

Kyogen, disappointed and thought Yisan unkind, burned up all his notes and memoranda that seemed to be of no help to his spiritual welfare, spend the rest of his life in solitude. One day, while sweeping the ground, a pebble, which he had swept, struck a bamboo. The unexpected sound produced by the percussion elevated his mind to a state of *satori* (intuitive looking-into). His joy was boundless. He finally came to the realization of Yisan’s kindness in refusing him instruction, for now he realized that this experience could not have happened to him if Yisan had been unkind enough to explain things to him. For the Zen, it is an experience that no amount of explanation or argument can make communicable to others unless the latter themselves had it previously [6].

Perhaps, most of us here are like Kyogen. To give up all security is hard. Fromm [3] describes, like being thrown into the ocean not knowing how to swim. Yet, we do not know what we have when we do give up the crutch of property, but only then can we begin to use our own proper forces and walk by ourselves. What holds us back to experience the mode of being is the illusion that we could not walk by ourselves, that we would collapse if we were not supported by the things we have.

Being, as expressed by Eckhart is “unmasking”. Being refers to the real, in contrast to the falsified, illusionary picture [3].

Further, in terms of time, the mode of being exists only in the here and now whereas the mode of having exists only in time (past, present and future). In the having mode we are bound to what we have amassed in the past: money, land, fame, social status, knowledge, memories, and children. We think about

the past, and feel the remembering feelings of the past. We are the past: I am what I was.

While the future is the anticipation of what will become the past. It is experienced in the mode of having as is the past and is expressed when one says: This person has a future.

The present is the point where past and future join, a frontier station in time, but not different in quality from the two realms it connects. Being is not necessarily out of time, but time is not the dimension that governs being. In the mode of being, we respect time, but we do not submit to it. However, this respect for time becomes submission when the having mode predominates. In this mode not only things are things, but also all that is alive becomes a thing. In the mode of having, time becomes our ruler. In the being mode, time is dethroned, it is no longer the idol that rules our life.

Time rules supreme in an industrial society. The current mode of production demands that every action be exactly “timed” that not only endless assembly line conveyor belt but, in a less crude sense, most of our activities be ruled by time. The machine must be used maximally; therefore the machine forces its own rhythm upon the worker.

Via machine, time has become our ruler. Only our free hours do we seem to have a certain choice. Yet we usually organize our leisure as we organize our work. Or we rebel against tyrant time by being absolutely lazy. By not doing anything except disobeying time’s demands, we have the illusion that we are free, when we are, in fact only paroled from out time-prison [3].

For Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger, time is important part of our being human. Sartre emphasizes that we should not live in the past otherwise one ends up living there. To think of either the past or future is to rob one of the vitality of the present. For Heidegger [4], time is part of our facticity, a part of our possibilities and limitations. Furthermore, for Heidegger, time is associated with death that is both a part of human possibility and authentic existence [5].

V. CONTRADICTIONS BETWEEN HAVING AND BEING

For Fromm, both having and being modes of existence are potentialities of human nature, which our biological urge for survival turns into having mode but that selfishness and laziness are not the only propensities inherent in human beings. Fromm argues that as humans, it is also inherent in us to escape the prison cell of selfishness.

The human desire to experience union with others is one of the strongest motivators of human behavior. In order not to feel utterly isolated, we need to find a new unity: with our fellow beings and nature. Present in human beings is to have, to possess, that owes its strength in the last analysis to the biological factor of the desire for survival. The other, to be, - to share, to give, to sacrifice, that owes its strength to the specific conditions of human existence and the inherent need to overcome one’s isolation by oneness with others.

From these two contradictory strivings in every human being it follows that the social structure, its values and norms, decides which of the two becomes dominant. Culture that foster the greed for possession, and thus the having mode of existence, are rooted in one human potential. Cultures that foster being

and sharing are rooted in the other potential. We must decide which of these two potentials to cultivate [3].

VI. NO AUTHENTIC SELF, NO IDENTITY

Based on the discussions of having and being modes, Fromm [3] proposed a new society that should encourage the emergence of a new human being. These are some of the functions of Fromm's envisioned society:

1. The willingness to give up all forms of having, in order to fully be.
2. Being fully present where one is.
3. Trying to reduce greed, hate and illusions as much as one is capable.
4. Making the full growth of oneself and of one's fellow beings the supreme goal of living.
5. Not deceiving others, but also not being deceived by others; one may be called innocent, but not naïve.
6. Freedom that is not arbitrariness but the possibility to be oneself, not as a bundle of greedy desires, but as a delicately balanced structure that at any moment is confronted with the alternatives of growth or decay, life or death.
7. Happiness in the process of ever-growing aliveness, whatever the furthest point is that fate permits one to reach, for living as fully as one can is so satisfactory that the concern for what one might or might not attain has little chance to develop.
8. Joy that comes from giving and sharing, not from hoarding and exploiting.
9. Developing one's capacity for love, together with one's capacity for critical, unsentimental thought.
10. Shedding one's narcissism and accepting that tragic limitation is inherent in human existence.

Thus, there is the nagging question of the emergence of a new society that would function as such. Today, the appeal of the new society goes to all who suffer from alienation, who are employed, whose property is not threatened. The appeal of a new society concerns the majority of the population, not merely a minority. The ideals of a new society cross all party lines. As each political party exploits the voters by persuading them that it represent the true values of humanism. Yet behind all political parties are only two camps: those who care and those who don't care.

If all those in the camp that cares could rid themselves of party clichés and realize that they have the same goals, the possibility of change would seem to be considerably greater; especially so since most citizens have become less and less interested in party loyalty and party slogans. People today, as Fromm [3] asserts, yearn for human beings who have wisdom and convictions and the courage to act according to their convictions.

Fromm argues that his proposed new society is not a choice between selfish materialism and the acceptance of the Christian concept of God. He said that if the City of God and Earthly city as perceived in the medieval culture would be synthesized, then, there would be an alternative to chaos: this synthesis the City of Being [3].

VII. CONCLUSION

People will pursue their self-interest and that one of the roles of Asian Christian thinker in the global age is to help clarify and improve the judgments we make [2]. Ancient philosophers such as Aristotle and Epicurus preached the philosophy of moderation or the idea that limited consumption and disciplining appetite since they accepted the idea that the proper level of consumption was a function of its role in furthering good human lives.

Likewise, in general, many environmentalists argue for limiting all types of consumption and economic activity – not just for transportation, food consumption but also energy use, housing construction and tourism – when these damage the environment or transform our remaining lands (that include intrinsic value of wild nature) to managed resources [2].

More, political economists argue that advanced industrial economies should be judged by the happiness of their participants and the opportunities for self-development they provide, rather than solely by their capacity to create wealth. Thus, the bottom line is: What is the purpose of the production and consumption that make up our economic lives?

For Cafaro [2] sometimes, more is more and less is less. However, sometimes, less is more. Both Fromm and Cafaro maintain that we should judge economic consumption on whether it improves or detracts from our lives, and act on that basis. Their concern seeks to place the issue of consumption in the context of living a good life, within justifiable limits.

For Fromm [3] and Cafaro [2], there are alternatives to view the purpose of economic activity in our contemporary globalizing world, and to ignore this is to slight our human nature. They put economic activity in the proper, wider context of our attempts to live well and create good societies.

Fromm's value of wisdom and a balanced perspective in life, serves as a pause, to reconsider the question, to have or to be, vital in our everyday existence vis-à-vis a world that becomes busier, more crowded and economically unstable. For Fromm, a satisfactory concept of human well-being extends beyond mere pleasure and physical health to encompass nobler human activities.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This author extends her profound gratitude to the organizers of 2017 Cebu International Conference on Studies in Arts, Social Science and Humanities for the opportunity to share her ideas to a larger audience. She also thank Dr. Jonathan V. Macayan, through the assistance of Research and Development Office of Mapúa Institute of Technology, for the realization of this paper presentation and publication. She is also grateful to her colleagues, friends and students for nourishing her "love of wisdom." She is eternally indebted to her late mother, Chalita, her father, Ernesto and siblings, Jose Mari and Mary Anne, for their unceasing belief and support in her endeavors

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This author became a Member of Asian Association of Christian Philosophers (AACP), Philosophical Association of the Philippines (PAP), Philippine National Philosophical Research and Society (PNPRS) and National Organization of Professional Teachers (NOPT). This author obtained her Ph.D. in Philosophy at De La Salle University, Manila in 2001. She graduated with distinction. Dr. Ramos also obtained her Masters degree in Philosophy also at DLSU-Manila in 1997 while her AB-Major in Humanities and Bachelor

of Science in Education were also obtained at the same school in 1991. She also completed a post graduate degree in education from the University of Hertfordshire, England in 1995.

As a PROFESSOR, she had taught philosophy, arts appreciation, logic and critical thinking at The Philippine Women's University and De La Salle University. Currently she is teaching at Mapúa Institute of Technology, Muralla St. Intramuros, Manila. She had published books such as *Introduction to the philosophy of the human person* (Quezon City, Rex Bookstore, 2016), *Introduction to philosophy* (Quezon City, Rex Bookstore, 2004) and *Globalization and technology* (Quezon City, Rex Bookstore, 2003). Her other related articles include *Ayn Rand and the person*, *Globalization, Technology and Martin Heidegger* and *Filipino indigenous thought*.

Dr. Christine Carmela R. Ramos is also a part of the book evaluation committee of the Humanities cluster of MIT.