

**ERICH
FROMM**

**THE
ART OF
BEING**

FROM THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE ART OF LOVING*



The Art of Being

Erich Fromm

Edited and with a Foreword by Rainer Funk



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Editor's Foreword

Between 1974 and 1976, while working on the book *To Have Or to Be?* at his home in Locarno, Switzerland, the aged Erich Fromm wrote far more manuscript and chapters than were actually used in the book, which was published in 1976. Some of these chapters are contained in the present volume. They deal entirely with the "steps toward being" that the individual can take in order to learn "the art of being."

Fromm withdrew the chapters on "Steps toward Being" from the typescript shortly before the typesetting of *To Have Or to Be?* because he believed that his book could be misunderstood to mean that each individual has *only* to search for spiritual wellbeing in the awareness, development, and analysis of himself without changing the economic realities that produce the having mode. The roots of the mass phenomenon of orientation toward "having," which are typical of a luxuriant society that has everything, were to be sought for in the economic, political, and social realities of modern industrial society, especially in its organization of labor, and in its modes of production.

Despite the fact that our orientation toward having is rooted in the structural realities of today's industrial culture, the overcoming of these realities consists in rediscovering man's own psychic, intellectual, and physical powers and in his possibilities of self-determination. For this reason, these "Steps toward Being" are now being published. They are intended to be a guide to productive self-awareness.

Recent trends have certainly made it clear that the awareness, realization, development, etc., of one's self almost always mean something other than the enhancement of one's own subjective powers. Today, by and

large, individual narcissism is simply being strengthened and the inability to reason and to love (which, according to Fromm, are characteristics of an orientation toward being) entrenched, as techniques of self-awareness offer new crutches of orientation toward having.

The following summary of some of the statements made earlier in *To Have Or to Be?* is meant not to be a substitute for having read that book, but rather to remind all who have read it of its most important thoughts.

Erich Fromm understood the alternatives having or being to be “two fundamental modes of existence, or two different kinds of orientation toward self and the world, two different types of character structure whose respective dominance determines the totality of how a person thinks, feels, and acts.” If one investigates all the possible ways in which a person can orient his life, then one comes to this conclusion: In the end, a person orients his life either toward having or toward being.

What does it mean when someone ultimately orients his or her life toward having?

Whoever orients his or her life toward having determines oneself, one’s existence, one’s meaning of life, and one’s way of life according to what one has, what that person can have, and what one can have more of. Now, there is almost nothing that could not become an object of having and of the desire to have: material things of all types—one’s own house, money, stocks, artworks, books, stamps, coins, and other things that, in part, can be amassed with “the passion of a collector.”

People, too, can become the object of having or of the desire to have. Of course, one does not say that one takes possession of another person and considers that person one’s property. One is more “considerate” in this regard and prefers to say that one is concerned about others and takes responsibility for them. But it is well known that whoever has the

responsibility for others also has the right to dispose of them. Thus, children, the disabled, the old, the sick, and those in need of care are taken possession of and considered to be a part of one's own self—and woe! should the sick become healthy and the child wish to decide for itself. Being determined by the having mode then becomes obvious.

As though it were not enough that other people can be “had,” we also determine the conduct of our lives by taking on or acquiring virtues and honors. All that matters to us is that we have esteem, a certain image, health, beauty, or youth, and when this is no longer possible, then we at least want to have “experience” or “memories.” Convictions of a political, ideological, and religious nature can also be acquired as possessions and staunchly defended—to the point of bloodshed. Everything is made dependent upon whether one is in possession of the truth or whether one is in the right.

Virtually anything can be possessed if a person orients his way of life toward having. The issue is not whether one does or does not have something, but rather whether a person's heart is set on what he or she does or does not have. Orientation toward not-having is a having orientation, too. Fromm is not advocating asceticism; orientation toward “being” is precisely what is not identical with orientation toward “not-having.” The perpetual question concerns the position that having or not-having holds in the determination of one's purpose in life and in the determination of one's own identity. It is often difficult to distinguish whether someone possesses something in the having mode of existence or, to quote Fromm, whether someone “possesses as if he were not possessing.” Yet each person can quickly test himself or herself by asking what he or she finds particularly valuable, thereby getting an idea of what would happen if he or she were to lose what was important and valuable: whether he or she would lose the

ground from under his or her feet and whether life would then become meaningless. If one can then no longer feel any self-reliance or self-value (intrinsic to oneself), if life and work are no longer worth anything, then one is determining life according to an orientation toward having: having a fine vocation, obedient children, a good rapport, profound insights, better arguments, and so forth.

The person who is oriented toward having always makes use of crutches rather than his or her own two feet. That person uses an external object in order to exist, in order to be oneself as he or she wishes. He or she is himself or herself only insofar as that person *has* something. The individual determines being as a subject according to the having of an object. He or she is possessed by objects, and thus by the object of having them.

At the same time, the metaphor of crutches replacing one's own feet makes apparent what is meant by a different orientation, that of being. Just as a person has a physical capacity for self-reliance, which can be replaced with crutches if need be, so does one have psychic abilities for self-reliance, too: a capacity for love, a capacity for reason, and a capacity for productive activity. But it is also possible for a person to replace those innate psychic powers with an orientation toward having, such that a capacity for love, reason, and productive activity depends upon the possession of those objects of having upon which the heart is set.

Love, reason, and productive activity are one's own psychic forces that arise and grow only to the extent that they are practiced; they cannot be consumed, bought, or possessed like objects of having, but can only be practiced, exercised, ventured upon, performed. In contradistinction to objects of having—which are expended when they are used up—love,

reason, and productive activity grow and increase when they are shared and used.

Orientation toward being always means that one's purpose in life is oriented toward one's own psychic forces. One recognizes, becomes acquainted with, and assimilates the fact that the unknown and the strange in oneself, and in the external world, are characteristic of *one's own self*. By learning this, one attains a greater and more comprehensive relationship with one's self and one's environment.

In *To Have Or to Be?* Fromm proceeded from the observation that today's orientation toward having is a mass phenomenon founded in the economic and social actualities of a society that has too much and that can, therefore, succumb to the temptation of letting itself be determined or defined by having. The enormous loss of individuals' own psychic forces can be found in the structural realities of present-day economics, of present-day organization of labor, and of present-day social life.

If the roots of the fateful development of the individual are to be sought for primarily in the socio-economically determined lot of today's person, then it is valid to proceed on the basis of these roots and to understand the individual as having always been socialized. That is why Fromm replaced the chapter on the "Steps Toward Being" with his suggestions for structural change. And that is why an individual's efforts to shift from an orientation toward having to an orientation toward being can make sense only if those efforts simultaneously change the structure of one's own setting. In vocational activity, in the organization of one's own work, and in political and societal self-awareness, the guiding values of one's own socio-economic way of life must be changed so that one can genuinely experience one's own psychic forces of reason, love, and productive activity and so that those powers can grow by use.

Our attempt to attain self-awareness and self-development, to attain a view of ourselves and of our world that truly corresponds to inner and external reality, is connected with the liberation of our socio-economic way of life. Indeed, “Only to the degree that the practice of life is freed from its contradictions and its irrationality can the map correspond to reality,” the author said in *To Have Or to Be?*

In the present volume, Erich Fromm first shows the false paths of self-awareness, just as he clearly recognized and identified them as such years ago, with all the pathos of a didact. Yet he then suggests ways of gaining self-awareness and shares with us the steps toward being that he himself has practiced daily, giving very extensive attention to *self-analysis* as an application of *psychoanalysis*.

Because the present work, available here for the first time, was not prepared for publication by Fromm himself, there was a need for occasional supplementation both of the division and systematization of the text as well as of the chapter headings.

Rainer Funk
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(Translated by Lance W. Garner)