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Consciousness Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009**

Piers H. G. Stephens

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# Book Reviews

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Harold Fromm

*The Nature of Being Human: From Environmentalism to Consciousness*

Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009

**Reviewed by:** Piers H. G. Stephens

University of Georgia, USA

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Literary ecocriticism is a relatively recent bloom in the academic garden and can perhaps best be described as having definitively established itself in 1996 with two key books: *The Environmental Imagination* by Laurence Buell and *The Ecocriticism Reader*, edited by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Fromm had already established himself as a significant literary commentator on environmental issues with a diverse series of essays over the two previous decades, starting with his 1976 essay “On Being Polluted,” and in this collection, he compiles these writings as “a record of the birth and maturation of the environmental movement over the last thirty years” that simultaneously serves as “a kind of *bildungsroman* of my own ecological consciousness as it morphed into my consciousness of consciousness itself” (p. 17). What we get, accordingly, is a rather meandering if entertaining journey through the development of Fromm’s intellectual concerns, organized into three unequally sized parts under the banners of “ecology” (12 essays), “‘nature’ and evolution” (7 essays), and finally “consciousness” (4 essays). It is an odyssey that, to put the matter unavoidable briefly and simply, starts with Fromm’s reflections about environmental impacts on human health, mood, and agency; moves from this to cover his rejection of social constructionist views and his conversion to Darwinian naturalist accounts of human activity; and concludes with his generally approving reflections on the materialist accounts of consciousness given by figures such as Daniel Dennett and Gerald Edelman, along with his rejection of the doctrine of human free will. Along the way we are also treated to Fromm’s perspectives on the relationships between humanity, nature, and technology, plus his reflections on the “two cultures” problem between the sciences and humanities, as well as his thoughtful evaluations of work by figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Roderick Nash, E. O. Wilson, Wendell Berry, J. M. Coetzee, Aldo Leopold, and Richard Dawkins, thus making for a collection that gives bountiful, entertaining breadth in exchange for occasional repetitiousness and a rather jerky approach to internal consistency.

Insofar as there is a unifying thread here, it may be seen to consist in Fromm’s steadily developing sense that certain familiar distinctions in academia and everyday experience can no longer be clearly drawn. The process begins with his reflections on pollution, in which he first suggests that the relationship between air quality and psychological well-being, and even the capacities for free agency, may be far more intimate than most of us—including many environmentalists—like to allow. “A new dimension can be added to the old philosophic chestnut about free will,” he writes, in which it is

not merely one’s genes, one’s prior psychic history, one’s parents, social class, etc., that determines one’s accomplishments, moods and perspectives. It’s also the chemical mix of the very air one is breathing, for breathing such air is a counterpart of eating food

contaminated with pesticides . . . except that the effects are often very immediate. How “free” is a creature whose worldview at a given moment has literally been concocted miles away in the vat of a steel mill? (p. 55)

This recognition of the fundamentally relational character of human agency and sensory experience leads Fromm to further repudiations of cherished divisions, most immediately those between the human, natural, and technological. Reporting his revelation that “everything human is technology,” which occurred to him while driving through the Sierras, he proceeds to piece together the now familiar claim that “we’re already cyborgs,” for even nature experience is technologically mediated: “Surely the uplift I felt at this landscape required a healthy body, good food, bourgeois nurturing and education, modern equipment and appliances—all from technologies” (p. 109). Such technology, moreover, cannot be separated from the human and since the human species is itself an evolutionary product “why should any particular phase of technology—or of evolution, for that matter—be thought of as more ‘natural’ than any other?” (p. 110). But this conceptualization of ontologically pure “nature” experience as saturated and conditioned with human technological inputs does not lead Fromm to any embrace of the antirealist social constructionism that pervades English departments and makes up so much of the wars over science studies. Rather, he maintains, it is technology that is a natural evolutionary product, for everything “is ‘nature’, produced from the finite materials of our planet and shaped by an aimless history with no favorites,” whereas culture “is just nature in artful and deliberate drag” (p. 188). Accordingly, Fromm emphasizes his position in support of broadly realist accounts of science and sides with evolutionary thinkers such as Wilson, Dawkins, Pinker, and Dennett in the debates over consciousness and evolutionary psychology. The effect, rather than relativizing science into a particular type of cultural story, is to reformulate the cultural storyteller into a product of biology and history, as the “author is not *constructed* by society; rather, ‘the author’ is constructed by billions of involuntary neurons with a vast prehistory, constantly *reformulated* by culture” and accordingly the author “as a disembodied self, a locus of creativity, is a phantom” (p. 238). Strong links thus exist between Fromm’s ecological thought, which he sees as requiring realism—he calls antirealist deconstruction “stunningly inapposite” since the extent of our environmental problems must mean that “the so-called real world begins to seem very real indeed” (p. 196)—and his repudiation of any account of consciousness, such as Searle’s, which invokes irreducibility. In these respects one can see clear lines of development and internal consistency amid an otherwise rather quirky diversity.

To my mind, Fromm is at his best in this collection when pursuing a topic for which he evidently has long-standing enthusiasm and connecting it to his wider concerns in a broad intellectual sweep, the later chapters on Emerson and Dawkins standing out especially for their quality in this regard. When this intellectually genial mood is on him, Fromm is a delight to read—engaging, scholarly, and highly stimulating in his wide-ranging erudition and eloquence. At the same time, he has no qualms about making direct assertions, and while this can sometimes be entertaining, not all the book’s politics are environmental: some are academic, perhaps even personal, as with his science studies related charge that “the academic left has become a profoundly mendacious and totalitarian establishment, crushing all voices other than its own . . . the ugly mirror image of the radical right” (p. 145). At these points, though rhetorical polemics are entertaining enough for some, this reviewer’s patience was strained. This was not because of strong attachment feelings to either Fromm or his science studies opponents—I see criticisms to be made of both perspectives—but simply because academic politics are notoriously unpleasant and debates over Darwinian inputs to the humanities and the aftermath of the Sokal hoax have been especially vitriolic. Under such circumstances, a 10-page chapter of partly autobiographical reflections on the nasty end of the science wars tends all too inevitably to become 10 pages of a scholar losing his temper. (Some of Fromm’s more temperate objections to his opponents’

views seem fair enough, but can he seriously mean that the left critics who sought to marginalize his academic voice are the “mirror image”—that is, directly equivalent—to the Fox News apologists for systematic torture and imprisonment without trial?) Thus, rather fittingly for a book so informed by environmental conditions, the role of authorial mood seems to play a strong part in determining the character and quality of the various essays contained within it.

In more substantive critical terms, such problems as arise with Fromm’s ideas seem to come from a similar source to that which is their primary inspiration: His recognition of the relational character of human knowing, while supporting his repudiation of many traditional distinctions, also seems to extend to conceptual conflation. Thus, he maintains not only that “everything human is technological” but that everything “human is anthropocentric as well” (p. 116), and because all “life continues in existence by feeding on other life” then “people are necessarily anthropocentric” (p. 78). But it is one thing to acknowledge that our starting point for any perspective of inquiry is sure to be our own region—that is, a form of *locational* anthropocentrism—and that our own survival interests frame our perceptions, it is quite another to conclude from this that we must be locked into a form of *normative* anthropocentrism, with any attempt to break out of it into biocentrism being merely “one more redescription of the anthropocentric will to power” (pp. 78-79). This looks like a species-level variant of the egoist fallacy, the question-begging view that because all interests are held by selves (a claim about *where* the interests reside), then all interests are *selfish* (a claim about the *character* of the interests, which does not follow from the premises). Similarly, he imports assumptions about egoist distortion into his treatment of intrinsic value, maintaining in Kantian fashion that we cannot know noumena because “the act of knowing in itself transforms them into phenomena, that is, into humanized interests” (p. 80). Indeed so, but while sensory phenomena will incorporate “humanized interests” to be intelligible to us as humans, this is quite different from supposing that such interests cannot be conceived of in terms of valuing others as ends (intrinsically) rather than merely as means (instrumentally). Moreover, while Fromm insists on anthropocentrism’s inevitability here, he occasionally forgets all about such situatedness himself when complaining about the claims of transcendence made by some environmentalists about nature experience. “Selective attributions of deity are the very essence of anthropocentrism” he complains, for if “[a]ssessed from the totality of possible viewpoints, everything would be equally sublime or mundane” (p. 114). But if there is no way that we can see outside our own anthropocentric perspective, as he insists, how can Fromm possibly know what a totality of possible viewpoints would look like, or whether sublimity and mundanity would even be significant components of it, let alone that they would stand in equal balance? It seems that here he cheerfully helps himself to a perceptual perspective whose very possibility he elsewhere denies. Clearly, despite his admirable interdisciplinarity, Fromm is most truly a literary scholar rather than a philosopher or scientist. Nonetheless, the journey that this book represents traverses all three realms of inquiry as well as showing an engaging and provocative intellectual trajectory, and it would be churlish to deny that it represents a real and enduring effort by an important thinker to grapple with a range of vital human and ecological issues.

## Bio

**Piers H. G. Stephens** is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Georgia, specializing in environmental philosophy, as well as being the reviews editor of the journal *Organization and Environment*. He attained his PhD at the University of Manchester, England in 1997 and has co-edited three books, *Perspectives on the Environment 2* (Avebury, 1995), *Environmental Futures* (Macmillan, 1999) and *Contemporary Environmental Politics* (Routledge, 2006), as well as contributing to journals including *Environmental Ethics*, *Environmental Values*, *Ethics and the Environment* and *Environmental Politics*. His research interests concern ideas of freedom, nature and the good in the liberal and pragmatist traditions, most notably as manifested in the thought of John Locke, J.S Mill and William James, and he is currently working on an interdisciplinary book entitled *Nature, Liberty and Dystopia* for Routledge, which should be published within the next year.