

SMPLECTY

Ecological Civilisation and the Will to Art



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Essays on the Aesthetics of Existence

Bad Faith and the Fear of Freedom: Can Art Shake Us Awake?

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‘Modern man lives under the illusion that he knows what he wants, while he actually wants what he is *supposed* to want... [He] is deeply afraid of taking the risk and the responsibility of giving himself his own aims.’

– ***Erich Fromm***

Bad Faith and the Fear of Freedom: Can Art Shake Us Awake?

Samuel Alexander

In previous essays I presented two different yet mutually supportive ways of understanding humanity as *homo aestheticus*, the artful species.¹ The discussion of human evolution showed why our historical practices of art and artification, along with the emergence of our aesthetic sensibilities, are fundamentally constitutive of how evolution has shaped us into creative, aesthetic animals. To the extent that humans share a nature, I argued that it is best understood as the art-created art creator – a being whose nature it is to transform itself and the world through art, aesthetic experience, and creative activity. I call this a ‘thin’ or ‘minimalist’ theory of human nature because the characteristics which our species share are fundamentally aesthetic. They do not fix or determine what type of creature we *must be* but rather show how and why we are *malleable and indeterminate* all the way down.

In short, our essence as a creature of evolution is to create our own essence, even as one must accept that we are also creatures shaped by the vagaries of history and context. As existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre put it: we can always make something new out of what we have been made into.² Our species is not so much a blank canvas as a surface that has been painted and repainted throughout history, waiting to be reworked endlessly through deliberative, creative expression and action. Our nature as *homo aestheticus* is open-ended because there will never come a time when all the possible pictures of our species have been drawn. We can always become something new.

My philosophical analysis of self-creation presented a parallel case for why our natures are not given to us in advance. By engaging Michel Foucault, I set out to explain why the ‘self’ is not a substance but a form, from which it follows that we must each give shape to the content of our lives and subjectivities. That is, we must create ourselves as an aesthetic project through ‘techniques of the self’ and aspire to poeticise our existence, to write our own stories rather than merely act out a pre-written script. By placing this conception of the self in cosmological context, this collection of essays is presenting a narrative about how the creative evolution of human aesthetic sensibility is fundamentally about the search for meaning and beauty. This is the telos of existence, the implicit goal of the cosmos. Through our aesthetic activity and contemplation, the universe is able to experience itself as an aesthetic phenomenon, the manifestation of the Will to Art coming to fruition.³ To paraphrase Immanuel Kant, beauty indicates that human beings have a place in the universe,⁴ at least potentially.

Nevertheless, in this essay I wish to acknowledge a significant problem regarding this conceptualisation of human beings as *homo aestheticus*. It is a difficulty that is evident as soon as one turns from theory to the world as it is: if we are an artful species, one that is creative and self-constituting, why is it that the world is so full of oppression, servitude, anxiety, and ugliness? If we are evolutionarily shaped to be aesthetic agents in an aesthetic universe, why do we see so many people in the ‘advanced’ affluent cultures seemingly content to distract

themselves with the trinkets and baubles offered by consumer capitalism? If we are free to create ourselves according to our own conception of the good life, why do so many people anxiously march like lemmings into the machine only to be chewed up and spat out in some homogenised form, the commodified maker and consumer of commodities, one-dimensional man in a one-dimensional market society?⁵

My explanation for this grim, uncreative reality is that our aesthetic natures have become deadened by the oppressive logic of economic reason – dying, but not dead. Too often we choose merely to obey the logic of acquisitive society, as if it were the only way. Our malleable selves are indeed being shaped, but not by ourselves as sculptors of personal existence, but by global capitalist society that needs obedient producers and consumers, not self-governing people who want to create themselves, as artists of life, forging their own paths into the future. After all, you cannot sell an infinite array of things to artists and artisans who are content with their aesthetic practices and basic material needs. This is why, throughout history, and in small subcultures today, artists and artisans often live relatively austere, non-consumerist lives of voluntary simplicity, in order to practise their arts and crafts. Capitalism has largely succeeded in beating this creative ethic out of humanity in order to maximise profits.

In what follows I will illuminate aspects of this problematic by drawing on Sartre's notion of 'bad faith', as well as the idea of 'fear of freedom' developed by German psychoanalyst Erich Fromm. I believe that these existential critiques can help explain the dire state of human freedom and creativity today, while also showing why the problems to which they point are within our power to resolve. In the second half of the essay, I explore how the failure to grasp one's own freedom can have deleterious effects on mental health, which on a cultural scale can produce a society that seems sick or even insane. This raises the question of what sanity might look like in an insane society. The discussion of these complex issues will lay the foundation for the next essay, which returns to consider the role of aesthetic education in advancing the cause of human self-creation in a world that so often interferes with the realisation of this innate potential.

Sartre on 'bad faith'

There are many political and structural challenges that can 'lock' people into the machinic systems of growth capitalism and consumer culture. These include purchasing land and housing, working long hours, financial insecurity, excessive advertising, and so forth.⁶ It would be foolish to deny that these types of structural challenges exist or that they constrain the forms of life that are available for pursuing, depending on social context and circumstance. We must acknowledge, that is, what the existentialists sometimes called 'facticity' – those external pressures that shape our lives without our consent or choosing.

But while we may have little immediate agency over the nature of those structures and external pressures, and as representative democracy seems to be nose-diving into an ever-deepening crisis of legitimacy, it becomes ever more necessary to carve out spaces at the personal and household levels where *spheres of agency* remain. Moreover, we must grasp hold of those spheres while they still exist. If we are indeed an artful and creative species, it is these spheres

of agency that we must reclaim first and foremost, for they are there for the taking, waiting to be embodied by bold practitioners of self-creation.

Nevertheless, it is precisely in these remaining spheres of agency where it seems so many people today are acting in what Sartre called 'bad faith'.⁷ In what is perhaps his most well-known pronouncement, he declared that human beings are 'condemned to be free'.⁸ The imposing language of 'condemnation' is deliberate, intending to imply a heaviness and seriousness to our most important life decisions, which can often leave the individual in a condition of anguish, not knowing what to do but knowing that the decision is important. Sartre's notion of bad faith was introduced to denote a psychological or existential condition of inauthenticity.

A person living in bad faith yields to the external pressures of society, and adopts dominant values unthinkingly, thereby denying one's own freedom to determine one's fate, one's values, and one's life project. Thus, bad faith is akin to a form of self-deception. It involves pretending that we are not free to choose when in fact we are always and already choosing, even in overwhelming circumstances. In contrast with bad faith, Sartre's notion of 'radical freedom' is intended to remind us that there are *always* choices to be made, no matter the circumstances. Even with a gun in one's mouth, one is still free to resist, to stay silent and still, or to smile at one's executioner.

Human existence is inherently burdened with the responsibility of choice. We are never *entirely* at the mercy of circumstances. The residue of freedom, which will differ for every individual in their unique life circumstances, is what I am calling our spheres of agency. To act in bad faith is to embrace a self-imposed delusion that these spheres of agency do not exist; that we don't have choices, when we do. In a famous example to illustrate this notion, Sartre discussed a waiter who excessively embodies his social role, whose movements and conversations are contrived and overdetermined, who seems overly eager to please, whose laugh is affected. This exaggerated or inauthentic behaviour suggests that he is play-acting as a waiter, choosing self-imposed rules of conduct that seem to be required by his role, but which are, in fact, voluntarily chosen to avoid the anguish of having to choose for himself how to live and to act. One might imagine that this waiter has dreams of being a musician or an activist, but instead of pursuing that life project he tells himself a narrative that there is no time, no money, no energy, and that he wouldn't succeed anyway. His life is disenchanting, apparently determined by circumstances.

Sartre suggested that this waiter is living in bad faith, consciously deceiving himself by freely choosing to deny his inescapable freedom. By pretending to be bound by external circumstances, the anguish of freedom is deferred, even if deferring the responsibility to choose is itself a choice. Circumstances matter, of course, but no circumstances dictate a single response. We are forced to choose. Most importantly, we are free to choose differently than the decisions made in the past. The self, as we saw in previous essays, is not a constant, static, or determinate substance. It is a form. One of the central themes of existentialism is the anguish and dread that can arise as we acknowledge the responsibility we each have to make difficult decisions throughout life. To uncritically defer to circumstances – to one's parents, to

a religious code, to a moral system, to public opinion, to habit, and so forth – is to negate the self and deny accountability, as if there were no choices to be made.

Just as there are no objective truths about life's meaning or purpose waiting for us 'out there' in moral or metaphysical reality, it is no good 'looking inward' to seek answers from your 'authentic self', for there is no self that precedes the decisions we make in our lives. There is nothing to observe. So how do we become who we really are? By taking hold of our freedom and acting, one way or another. The unsettling challenge is that we are free to reappraise our situation at every moment; free to give birth to ourselves anew everyday. This defining aspect of the human condition is as terrifying as it is exhilarating. To deny oneself this creative task, to avoid it, is to live in bad faith.

Fear of freedom

The question, then, is this: why might a person live in bad faith? Part of the answer, as noted above, is that living in bad faith can be a strategy for deferring the anguish of having to choose how to live (even though living in bad faith is itself a choice). Perhaps an even more powerful way to express this phenomenon is to say, with Erich Fromm, that many people live as they do out of a 'fear of freedom'.⁹ Can freedom become a burden too heavy for humanity to bear, something from which we might try to escape? This is, admittedly, a perplexing, even paradoxical, proposition, given that many people throughout history have sooner died in the struggle against oppression than live without freedom. And yet, Fromm's diagnosis – arguably as applicable to our time as his own – was that, in fact, many people, and indeed entire cultures, were escaping their own freedom. They were doing so to avoid the burden of responsibility and accountability that comes with such liberty.

Fromm argued that this fear of freedom was manifesting in three main ways. First, he was witnessing a voluntary surrender of power to authoritarian states – notably, his book *Fear of Freedom* was published in 1942.¹⁰ This was obviously an era of German and Italian fascism, but Fromm maintained that the emergence of these fascist states was not primarily a result of a mad dictator, the cunning and trickery of a few megalomaniacs, or cultural inexperience in democracy. Rather, he saw that millions of Europeans were as willing to surrender their freedom as the previous generations were to fight for it.

Far from suggesting this was an isolated problem for Germans and Italians, Fromm asserted that this surrender was observable within every modern state. Fromm quoted American philosopher John Dewey, who formulated this concern forcefully in the following words: 'The serious threat to our democracy,' Dewey suggested, 'is not the existence of foreign totalitarian states. It is the existence within our own personal attitudes and within our own institutions of conditions which have given a victory to external authority, discipline, uniformity and dependence upon The Leader in foreign countries. The battlefield is also accordingly here – within ourselves and our institutions.'¹¹ Fromm worried that, just as there was an innate human urge for freedom, there may also be an instinctive wish for submission. This submissive disposition could take the form of deferring to external forces (such as a state or an economic system), internal forces (such as a moral code of conscience), or anonymous forces (such as

public opinion).¹² In all such cases, the individual escapes freedom and finds a form of security through submitting to some authority that prescribes how one ought to think and act.

The second manifestation of the fear of freedom, according to Fromm, is the observable urge to destroy. Without getting into the intricacies of his psychoanalytical theory, Fromm maintained that when a human being gained 'freedom from' an oppressive authority in the past (e.g., a state or a church) but failed to find meaningful 'freedom to' engage in self-directed creative activity, the individual can try to resolve the burden of their freedom by desperately destroying the world or themselves. He explained:

Any observer of personal relations in our social scene cannot fail to be impressed with the amount of destructiveness to be found everywhere. For the most part it is not conscious as such but is rationalized in various ways. As a matter of fact, there is virtually nothing that is not used as a rationalization for destructiveness. Love, duty, conscience, patriotism have been and are used as disguises to destroy others or oneself.¹³

Fromm argues that such destructiveness can emerge either from anxiety or from what he calls the thwarting of life. Regarding anxiety, the reasoning is that when a person's vital interests (material or emotional) are threatened, this induces a state of anxiety, from which destructive tendencies often follow out of a sense of powerlessness. Destruction can be an anxious grasping for power and security. Regarding the thwarting of life, Fromm argues that 'the isolated and powerless individual is blocked in realising his sensuous, emotional and intellectual potentialities,'¹⁴ such that 'the amount of destructiveness to be found in individuals is proportionate to the amount to which expansiveness of life is curtailed.'¹⁵ In other words: '*Destructiveness is the outcome of unlived life.*'¹⁶ The flawed assumption of this strategy is that by destroying others or the world, the individual will be less threatened by the external world. The result, however, is that destructive individuals usually end up destroying themselves in the process.

The final strategy for escaping freedom, and one deserving of special emphasis, is the tendency for individuals to evade their freedom by uncritically adopting the personality offered to them by cultural patterns. Fromm calls this mechanism 'automaton conformity':¹⁷

The discrepancy between 'I' and the world disappears and with it the conscious fear of aloneness and powerlessness. This mechanism can be compared with the protective colouring some animals assume. They look so similar to their surrounds that they are hardly distinguishable from them. The person who gives up his individual self and becomes an automaton, identical with millions of other automatons around him, need not feel alone and anxious anymore. But the price he pays, however, is high; it is the loss of his self.¹⁸

Fromm developed this line of thinking as follows:

... the truth [is] that modern man lives under the illusion that he knows what he wants, while he actually wants what he is *supposed* to want. In order to accept this it is necessary to realize that to know what one really wants is not comparatively easy, as most people think, but one of the most difficult problems any human being has to solve. It is a task we frantically try to avoid by accepting ready-made goals as though they were our own. Modern man is ready to take great

risks when he tries to achieve the aims which are supposed to be 'his' but he is deeply afraid of taking the risk and the responsibility of giving himself his own aims.¹⁹

So why do we sometimes act in bad faith? In summary, Fromm argued that we fear our freedom. We are sometimes inclined to prefer submission to an authority rather than the agony of choice and responsibility; we sometimes tend toward destruction as a self-defeating strategy for managing our sense of isolation and powerlessness. And we often seek the anonymity of conformity in the hope of dissolving into a faceless crowd where decisions are made for us. For all these reasons, and more, our inherent creative capacities and potentials as *homo aestheticus* too often lie dormant and repressed. The result can be a society that looks insane. This is another topic on which Fromm showed profound insight. Let us turn to this now.

***Delusions of sanity: deconstructing madness in an insane world*²⁰**

In his 1955 book, *The Sane Society*,²¹ Fromm suggested that nothing is more common than the assumption that we, people living in the advanced industrial economies, are eminently sane. The fact that so many individuals will suffer from more or less severe forms of mental illness does not seem to shake our conviction with respect to the overall state of our mental health. According to Fromm, we are inclined to see incidents of mental illness as strictly individual and isolated disturbances, while acknowledging – with some discomfort, perhaps – that so many of these incidents should occur in a culture that is supposedly sane.²²

Fromm haunts our self-image even today, unsettling these assumptions of sanity: 'Can we be so sure that we are not deceiving ourselves? Many an inmate of an insane asylum is convinced that everybody else is crazy, except himself.'²³ This line of inquiry is especially disconcerting in a world where, to use Fromm's somewhat antiquated language, inmates evidently have taken over the asylum and seem intent on running it into the ground. The existential threat of climate breakdown is only one of the ominous indicators of this reckless death drive, but it alone has the potential to lay waste to our species as well as most others. In an age now widely described as the Anthropocene, the conventionally held distinction between sanity and insanity is at risk of collapsing.

The distinction, therefore, is ripe for deconstruction. At least since Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* (1961),²⁴ it has been understood that the idea of (in)sanity is, in some respects, an evolving, socially constructed category. Not only does the medical validity of mental health diagnoses and treatments shift with the times, but what has been judged 'sane' in one era has the potential to blur into what is not in another – and without announcement. This can disguise the fact that social practices or patterns of thought that may once have been considered healthy may now be properly diagnosed as unhealthy. And while this can apply to individual cases, there is no reason to think it should not also apply more broadly to a society at large. That is, a society might go insane without being aware of its own degeneration.

Surely we would know if our society was insane? Not necessarily. One does not need to be a conspiracy theorist to recognise, with Foucault, that power shapes knowledge. If profits and economic growth are the benchmarks of success in a society, it cannot be profitable to expose

a society as insane. Even members of an insane society may sooner choose wilful blindness than look too deeply into the subconscious of their own culture. Thus an accurate diagnosis can be easily obscured or ignored if it does not accord with dominant interests. But merely *assuming* something or someone is sane does not make it so. We should always reserve the right to think for ourselves about these matters, to be brave enough to stare into the abyss – and be prepared for the abyss to stare back – no matter what we find.

It feels important to delve into these critical provocations: are the societies of globalised capitalism sane? If they are not – and I find myself pointing towards this thesis – another question follows: what might sanity look like in an insane world? After all, as the Indian guru Jiddu Krishnamurti is often credited with saying: ‘It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society.’²⁵ This makes it all the harder to diagnose the state of a society’s sanity, given that it is never clear whether it is the people who are sick or the society. We should at least leave open the possibility, as investigative journalist Johann Hari suggests in *Lost Connections*,²⁶ that some mental health conditions might be perfectly normal responses to a particular state of society, not resolvable simply with a rebalancing of chemicals in the brain through pharmaceuticals. Indeed, to paraphrase Martin Luther King Jnr, there are some things in our world to which we should be proud to be maladjusted.

Accordingly, in this final part of the essay I would like to reflect, at a ‘macro’ level, on the sanity or insanity of the dominant culture and political economy in contemporary capitalist societies, asking how the world ‘out there’ can impact the inner dimension of our lives. Following Fromm’s lead, I will inquire not so much into individual pathology, but into what he calls ‘collective neuroses’ or ‘the pathology of normalcy’. Of course, collective neuroses are not easily observed, for they are, by nature, the background fabric of existence and so easily missed. Be warned, then: we might be like the fish that do not know they swim in water. The purpose of this analysis is to lay the foundation for forthcoming essays which will argue that art and aesthetic education are the best means of shaking humanity out of its fear of freedom. Such an education, I will argue, also has potential to resolve or at least mitigate some of the mental health issues which can flow from living in bad faith in a sick society.

Is our society insane?

It is the cultural relativity of sanity that Fromm calls into question in *The Sane Society*. ‘The fact that millions of people share the same vices,’ he wrote, ‘does not make these vices virtues, the fact that they share so many errors does not make the errors to be truths, and the fact that millions of people share the same forms of mental pathology does not make these people sane.’²⁷ He felt that society needed certain objective conditions to be sane, including environmental sustainability. If too many of humankind’s most basic needs were not being met despite unprecedented wealth, he felt it would be proper to declare a society sick, even if the behaviour producing the sickness was widespread and validated by its own internal cultural logic. This invites critical reflection on what is deemed ‘normal’ behaviour today, just in case we are participating in practices that, from an external or objective perspective, would be diagnosed as patently insane. After all, if our society were sick, surely we’d want to know.

Let us, in good psychiatric fashion, look at the facts. The climate emergency has already been mentioned, pointing to humanity's fatal addiction to fossil fuels. We know their combustion is killing the planet, but we can't seem to resist the short-sighted convenience. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was established in 1988 to advise on the science of climate change, yet here we are, more than thirty years later, and carbon emissions continue to rise (excepting only the years of financial crisis or pandemic). As of 2022, approximately thirty-seven gigatons of carbon dioxide are emitted into the atmosphere each year from energy production, in full knowledge of their impacts. Driven by a fetish for economic growth, we continue using these fossil fuels to supply around 84 per cent of global primary energy demand, voting in politicians who celebrate coal and enthusiastically cut the ribbons of new fossil fuel power stations. It is a tragedy disguised as a grim joke.

Scientists warn that current trajectories of climate heating are not compatible with civilisation as we know it, with potentially billions of lives at risk in coming decades, both human and non-human. You know something is wrong when the Arctic is burning, and in recent years this is precisely what has happened. And yet nothing is more 'normal' than hopping into a fossil-fuelled car or consuming products that have been shipped around the world to satisfy the carboniferous desires of affluent society. I mention these features of industrial civilisation not to sit in judgement: we are, so to speak, in the soup together. But let us not divert our gaze just because it is embarrassing and uncomfortable to look in the mirror.

The same fossil fuels underpin our destructive systems of industrial agriculture. Humanity is deforesting the planet and destroying topsoil to feed a population that is growing by over 200,000 people every day. The United Nations project that we will reach almost ten billion people by mid-century. This human dominance of the planet under global capitalism is devastating wildlife populations and biodiversity, with the World Wildlife Fund recently reporting that populations of vertebrate species have declined by 68 per cent since 1970. It is no exaggeration to say that we are living through the sixth mass extinction, driven by human economic activity that is not just normal but encouraged, rewarded, and widely admired.

The flow of materials and resources through the global economy is now in excess of 100 billion tonnes per year, and that's expected to double in coming decades despite deluded hopes for 'green growth'. And how easily are we blinded to our incrementally destructive practices. It is seen as perfectly normal to purchase and discard single-use plastics that end up polluting our rivers and oceans for hundreds or thousands of years. We direct our growing and increasingly toxic waste streams away from cities and into the natural environment to be dealt with by future generations or poorer communities. Human trash has been found in Antarctica, in the deepest parts of the ocean, and 'space junk' is now a concern for orbiting spacecraft and satellites. Nowhere and nothing is sacred. In 2017, more than 15,000 scientists signed the second 'Warning to Humanity' – the first was published in 1992 – advising that misery and catastrophe await if fundamental shifts in our civilisation are not urgently taken. And still, as if suffering a collective neurosis, Empire marches on like a snake eating its own tail, pursuing growth for growth's sake – the ideology of a cancer cell.

Added to this is the fact that humanity lives in the terrifying shadow of its own nuclear arsenals, representing a unique technological capacity for mutually assured destruction.

Whether the furnace of climate change or a nuclear winter lies ahead, it is too early to say. Alternative pathways are getting harder to imagine. In the twentieth century, ordinary people marched off to war after war, resulting in the death of more than 100 million. One dares not imagine what the next global military clash might bring, as we nervously watch superpowers butt heads. The geopolitical arena remains a nuclear tinderbox of fiercely competing interests. What's next?

Of course, ecological and geopolitical tragedies cannot be isolated from the humanitarian crises of poverty and inequality. In 2017, Oxfam released a study concluding that the richest eight men now own more than the poorest half of humanity. Dwell on that for a moment if you have the courage. We can debate research methodologies or 'theories of justice', but the point is now undeniable: the distribution of wealth in our world is harrowingly unjust, with small islands of unfathomable plenty surrounded by vast oceans of humiliating poverty. There is nothing 'natural' about this concentration of wealth. It is a result of choices that we humans make about how to structure our economies. Things could be different, but we've been duped into thinking this is 'just the way the world is' and that the trickle-down effect will sort things out. The moral egregiousness of poverty is all the more disturbing given that the human capacity to eliminate hunger has never been greater. The global development agenda is failing. It is a sign of idiocy to keep doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.

This is not happy reading, I know, but things get even worse. A spiritual malaise seems to be spreading throughout advanced capitalist societies, as if the material rewards of consumerism have failed to fulfil their promise of a happy and meaningful existence. Scholars publish books about it, with suggestive titles like Robert Lane's *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies*; David Myers' *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty*; and Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss' *Affluenza: When Too Much Is Never Enough*. For whom, then, do we destroy the planet? Is a greater abundance of 'nice things' what we are lacking in the overdeveloped world? Or is there, as historian and philosopher Lewis Mumford once opined, an inner dimension to our crises that must be resolved before the outer crises can be effectively met?²⁸

In the face of all this it is easy to feel chronically disenchanting with life, to feel disconnected from people, place, and purpose. We humans of late capitalism have all felt, and perhaps currently feel, this disconnection. How easy it is to live by regurgitating the prewritten script of advanced industrial society: cogs in a vast machine, easily replaced. Perhaps we see our disenchantment reflected in the eyes of those tired, alienated commuters, a class into which it is so easy to fall simply by virtue of being subjects of the capitalist order. We all know that there is more to life than *this*. We find ourselves living in an age where the old dogmas of growth, material affluence and technology are increasingly exposed as false idols. Like a fleet of ships that has been unmoored in a storm, our species is drifting in dangerous seas without a clear sense of direction.

Where are the new sources of meaning and guidance that all societies need to fight off the ennui? Émile Durkheim, the nineteenth-century pioneer of sociology, used the term 'anomie' to refer to a condition in which a culture's traditional norms have broken down without new

norms arising that can give sense to a changing world. Perhaps this is the term that best explains our existential condition today. We are coming to realise that we have lost our way, as the factors that are supposed to represent 'progress' according to dominant cultural myths are increasingly experienced as breakdown.

One could go on, but it would be perverse to do so. 'Doom porn' is not my business or purpose. My point is simply to present a summary case for diagnosing our society as insane – not as rhetorical strategy, but in the pursuit of literal truth. If an individual knowingly destroyed the conditions of his or her own existence, we'd question their sanity. If a mother only fed her children if she could make a profit, we'd doubt the soundness of her mind. If a father took all the household wealth and left the rest of the family in destitution while building bombs in the basement that could destroy the neighbourhood, we'd call him psychopathic. And yet these are characteristics of our society as a whole. Fromm would not permit us to diagnose ourselves and our society as sane just because the actions that produce the features outlined above are considered 'normal'. There is a pathology to our normalcy, and this pathology is no less pathological just because it is shared by millions upon millions of people.



The issue at the heart of this exploration concerns the mental health effects that might naturally and justifiably arise when otherwise sane people find themselves living in an insane world. The paradox that threatens to emerge has already been variously noted. In *Welcome to the Monkey House* (1968), Kurt Vonnegut Jnr wrote, 'a sane person in an insane society must appear insane'. Thomas Stephen Szasz contended that 'Insanity is the only sane reaction to an insane society.' And the British psychiatrist R.D. Laing concluded that insanity was 'a perfectly rational adjustment to an insane world'. I think I recall Dr Spock saying something similar.

But perhaps Fromm's words offer the most incisive diagnosis for our time:

A person who has not been completely alienated, who has remained sensitive and able to feel, who has not lost the sense of dignity, who is not yet 'for sale', who can still suffer over the suffering of others, who has not acquired fully the 'having' mode of existence – briefly, a person who has remained a person and not become a thing – cannot help feeling lonely, powerless, isolated in present-day society. He cannot help doubting himself and his own convictions, if not his sanity. He cannot help suffering, even though he can experience moments of joy and clarity that are absent in the life of his 'normal' contemporaries. Not rarely will he suffer from neurosis that results from the situation of a sane man living in an insane society, rather than that of the more conventional neurosis of a sick man trying to adapt himself to a sick society.²⁹

Indeed, how can we not get depressed when reading the newspapers today or watching political leaders go about their business with such confident incompetence? How can we not grieve the wildlife and natural habitat being destroyed each moment? What parent can look to the future and not feel a foreboding dread at what world their children and grandchildren will inherit? At the same time, and because of that dread, it is hard to maintain the emotional resources to care for strangers or 'join a movement' when stress, agitation, worry, and busyness clutter our mental lives. This can make society seem like a harsh place, lacking in generosity of spirit or compassion.

As I see it, cultural disenchantment is capitalism's most significant achievement. Its function is to ensure that we, the people, often lack the energy to mobilise in resistance or renewal. The austerity politics of neoliberalism is syphoning ever more of us into the 'precarariat' – the growing class of workers who live anxiously with the financial insecurity that flows from the casualisation of the workforce. The COVID-19 pandemic has expanded its ranks and cast even more into unemployment. All this can curdle the imagination and tempt one to despair.

I am reminded of a 2003 poem by Australian poet Michael Leunig that speaks to our current condition:

*They took him on a stretcher
To the Home for the Appalled
Where he lay down in a corner
And he bawled and bawled and bawled.
'There's nothing wrong with me,' he wailed,
When asked about his bawling,
'It's the world that needs attention;
It's so utterly appalling.'*

Whether such dark moods arise from watching white supremacists march or listening to climate deniers speaking in parliament or given platforms in mass media, a nausea sets in, a sickness not so much of the mind but of the soul. To be mentally and spiritually disturbed in the face of today's overlapping cultural, economic, and ecological crises is, I maintain, a sign that one's faculties are intact, that one's heart has not fully closed up. This is an existential diagnosis, not a medical or psychiatric one. It would be wrong to make peace with this madness. The world we live in should not be treated as normal, and it should not be a sign of good health to become 'well adjusted' to a society that is casually practising ecocide, celebrating narcissism, institutionalising racism, and assessing the value of all things according to the cold logic of profit maximisation.

We must not assume that behaviour that makes an individual 'functional' within a sick society is sufficient evidence of sanity. In such a society, it is okay not to feel okay, to cry and feel grief, to feel dread and alienation. In our tears, let us find solidarity, for we are not alone. Remember this when you wake up prematurely in the morning with an anxiety without object, or as you stare at the ceiling late at night as you try to fall asleep. You are not losing your mind. It is precisely because you have a grip on reality that reality seems so out of whack.

Shaken awake by art: Disrupting the self through aesthetic education

This essay began by highlighting how human creativity is being voluntarily though insidiously suppressed by people who are, to varying extents, living in bad faith and with fear of freedom. The second half of the analysis offered a broader critique of the features of contemporary society that can, with good cause, be categorised as insane. I showed that being maladjusted to an insane society is paradoxically a sign of mental health, of sanity. My primary purpose, however, has been diagnostic rather than prescriptive: my assessment is that failing to take hold of our freedom – within those spheres of agency waiting for us to embody – is antithetical to our natures as creative beings. To live in bad faith and with fear of freedom is not the whole

cause of the insanity of our societies but it is a contributing cause, perhaps a leading one. The good news, however, is that we are free to choose otherwise. If we are to resolve some of the many features of our insane society that are inhibiting our creative potentials and deadening our aesthetic sensibilities, then we need to be brave enough to reclaim our spheres of agency – brave enough to be aesthetic agents in an aesthetic universe.

Having offered this diagnosis, I now point to a prescription, which was anticipated in the previous essay on Friedrich Schiller and which will be developed in the next essay. In essence, the prescription offered is that we should look to reignite our innate need for freedom and the love of life through aesthetic education and engagement. To the extent that we are living in bad faith and with fear of freedom – and we *all* will be to some extent – then I believe we need to find ways to disrupt our ‘normal sense of self’. My argument is that art and aesthetics may be the best means of shaking us awake. We need to awaken or reawaken a state of ‘play’, being the condition of aesthetic freedom in which our normal sense of self can be disrupted; when our normal sense of self is liberated from its own self-imposed rules and regulations.

I put this forward as the best antidote to living in bad faith and fear of freedom. It is a promising coincidence that this aesthetic ignition of our need for freedom may also offer a form of ‘art therapy’, a welcome and perhaps necessary existential salve as we find ourselves living in an insane society. My intention, at this stage, is not to argue for the particulars of an alternative form of life, but to find ways for more people to discover that there *are* different forms of life. As Henry Thoreau insisted, there are ‘as many ways as there are radii from one center.’³⁰ If people can arrive at this conclusion, their freedom will have been expanded.

¹ See Samuel Alexander ‘Homo Aestheticus, the Artful Species: An Evolutionary Perspective’ and Samuel Alexander, ‘Giving Birth to Oneself: Ethics as an “Aesthetics of Existence”’, in this collection of essays. The full set is being published here: <http://samuelalexander.info/s-m-p-l-c-t-y-ecological-civilisation-and-the-will-to-art/> (accessed 10 May 2023).

² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 101.

³ See Samuel Alexander, ‘Creative Evolution and the Will to Art’ in this collection of essays. See link in note 1.

⁴ Kant’s phrase is: ‘Beautiful things indicate that man fits into the world’, as quoted in Wolfgang Welsch, ‘Schiller Revisited: “Beauty is freedom in Appearance” – Aesthetics as a Challenge to the Modern Way of Thinking’ *Contemporary Aesthetics* (2014) 12: fn 1.

⁵ Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (London: Routledge, 2002).

⁶ See, e.g., Christer Sanne, ‘Willing Consumers – or Lock-In? Policies for Sustainable Consumption’ *Ecological Economics* (2002) 42(1-2): pp. 273-287.

⁷ Sartre on bad faith

⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism* (London: Methuen and Co, 1970), p. 34.

⁹ Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom* (Oxon: Routledge, 2001).

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 3.

¹¹ *Ibid*.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 4.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 154.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 156.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 157.

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- ¹⁶ Ibid, p. 158 (emphasis in original).
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Ibid, p. 159.
- ¹⁹ Ibid, p. 218.
- ²⁰ This section draws on my essay, 'Delusions of Sanity: Deconstructing Madness in an Insane World' (2021) *Griffith Review* 72: pp. 238-247.
- ²¹ Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (London: Routledge, 2002).
- ²² Fromm, *The Sane Society*, note 21, p. 3.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2006).
- ²⁵ See The Foundation Staff, 'Regarding the Quote' *Krishnamurti Foundation Trust*. Available at: <https://kfoundation.org/it-is-no-measure-of-health-to-be-well-adjusted-to-a-profoundly-sick-society/> (accessed 18 February 2023).
- ²⁶ Johann Hari, *Lost Connections* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).
- ²⁷ Fromm, *The Sane Society*, note 21, p. 15.
- ²⁸ Lewis Mumford, *The Condition of Man* (London: Mariner Books. 1973).
- ²⁹ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Being* (New York: Open Road, 2013), p. 136.
- ³⁰ Henry Thoreau, *Walden*, in Carl Bode (ed.) *The Portable Thoreau* (New York: Penguin, 1982), p. 266.