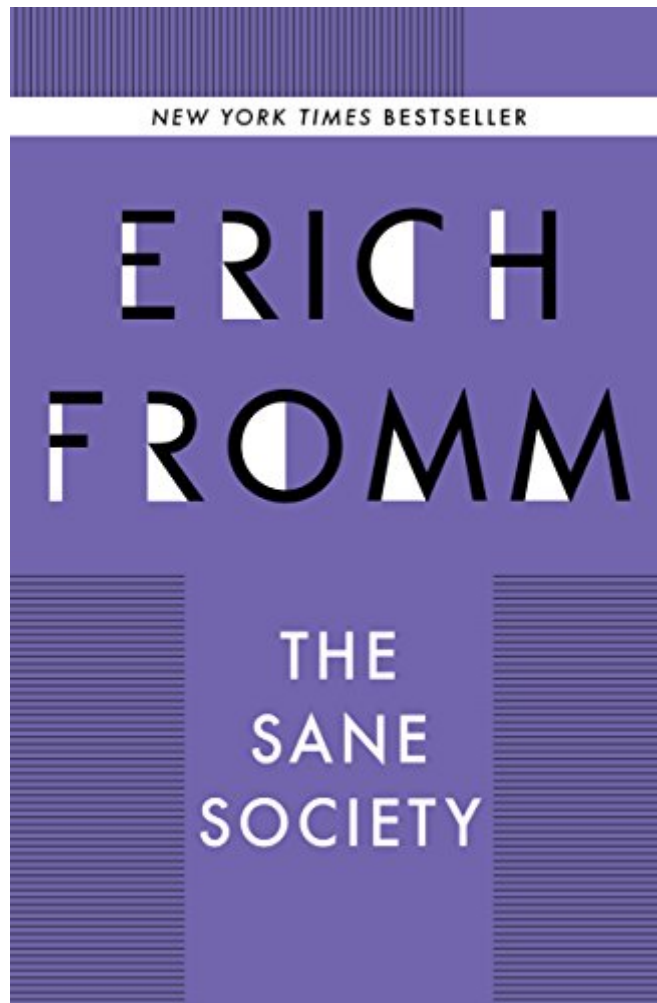


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# The Sane Society



## Synopsis

A New York Times bestseller about overcoming the profound ills of modern society by a legendary social psychologist, the author of *Escape from Freedom*. Erich Fromm's main interests was to analyze social systems and their impact on the mental health of the individual. In this study, he reaches further and asks: "Can a society be sick?" He finds that it can, arguing that Western culture is immersed in a "pathology of normalcy" that affects the mental health of individuals. In *The Sane Society*, Fromm examines the alienating effects of modern capitalism, and discusses historical and contemporary alternatives, particularly communitarian systems. Finally, he presents new ideas for a re-organization of economics, politics, and culture that would support the individual's mental health and our profound human needs for love and freedom. This ebook features an illustrated biography of Erich Fromm including rare images and never-before-seen documents from the author's estate.

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## Customer Reviews

Fromm is quite an enlightened psychologist/sociologist. This is a great read on understanding the cultural cancer of alienation as well as its basis saying back from the economic beginnings of capitalism.

I read *THE SANE SOCIETY* when I was 23, and it was possibly the most influential book I ever read. At that time, I had just had the epiphanic realization that society is insane. I have never changed my mind about that, though I've learned to live with it less uncomfortably. I thought that if people just read and paid attention to Erich Fromm we could straighten everything out. I have changed my mind about that, but still think it is an essential first step. The insanity of society does not seem like it should be incurable. It is a mental state rather than an organic defect. Fromm spends a lot of time elaborating upon alienation of modern man. For most workers, this alienation is caused by the dissociation of their work from the purpose of that work. This is much more true for manual workers than professionals, though both are plagued by this. I became a school teacher because I'd seen how little education has to do with preparing people for life. "When I think back on all the crap I learned in high school, it's a wonder that I can think at all," as Paul Simon sang. Any education which deserves the name should be about teaching people how to think, but that can't be done without threatening people's sense of piety or patriotism. Which are the very things which make people insane. Fromm states that the messages of Moses, Christ, Muhammad, and Buddha (and perhaps even Marx?) are all essentially the same. This implies that there is an underlying objective Truth in the Universe that everyone should be capable of agreeing upon. That there should be criteria for deciding upon moral truths that all reasonable people could agree upon. If we were not alienated from our "true selves." So the purpose of organized religion is not to help us connect with the core of our being, which was the purpose of the teaching of these men, but to keep us divorced from ourselves. If this was indeed the purpose of our religious founders, (and this was my realization in my epiphanal moment), then it is true that religions are doing the opposite of what their founders had in mind. On the other hand, I find the argument that Moses and Christ and Buddha had the same message difficult to swallow. Reading about Abraham, Job, Moses, and Samuel and so on was what originally made me hate religion. I see no wisdom, nor even sanity, in their stories. I wish someone could explain how it is possible to disagree with this perception.

Great read!

*Sane Society* is one of the best books I ever read. Erich Fromm makes a brilliant analysis of why

humans tend to like and support dictatorships and authoritarian governments such as the nazis and fascim. He also talks about why in our current democratic contries, people give up being who they really are to become someone dictated by society in order to cope with loneliness and powerlessness and, meanwhile, firmly believing they are who they really are and are expressing their uniqueness. I pretend reread this book soon and do it many times more in the future. It is a wonderful guide into the human soul and helps to explain why there are so many misery, injustice and cruelty in the world. I recomend.

The kernel of Dr. Fromm's analysis and the starting point for his further discussions is the definition of "human nature" - from the psychological standpoint. For him the human's psyche is not a computer (to use contemporary metaphor) on which society can install any programs of behavior it requires. If the social programs - norms of conduct and value judgments, i.e. what is good and bad, what one shall strive for etc. - do not match the natural, evolutionary pre-defined needs of the human being, psychological defects and neurosis shall occur. The mentally healthy, i.e. sane person is thus the one who does not have defects and does not experience neurosis, who lives in a society that through economic, political and social channels promotes and furthers his harmony with requirements of his, human nature. For many of us it may be very surprising and even suspicious that somebody can question the sanity of western society and thus sanity of the majority of its individual members. How, after all, can people who have achieved such dramatic heights in the scientific thought, who have so rapidly progressed in mutual creation of such elaborated technologies, and who then make them work with an even-increasing efficiency, be not sane? The answer lies in the definition and the meaning of "sanity". For Fromm the term "in-sane" does not equal "idiot". An in-sane person is not necessarily the one who has abnormally low IQ (intelligence level), but the one who is not truly aware of himself and of his nature, whose reason (i.e. the ability to "grasp the world by thought", to penetrate beneath the surface of things and ideas as opposed to mere ability to manipulate given objects and facts) ceased to develop properly or deteriorated; an in-sane person fails to see the difference between the means for his life - money and material possessions as most straightforward examples - and the aims of life. The one who lives for something that he consciously or unconsciously puts higher than him - be it material things or other persons whom he worships. The aim of productive, that is truly human, life for Dr. Fromm is threefold: 1) the realization of man's productive powers, 2) development of his reason, and 3) experience of true love - not only of erotic love, but the true love for ones neighbor that so many religions had manifested. His diagnosis is that our average contemporary fails miserably in all three

spheres. Again we may at first rebel at such humiliating statement but only until we go along with the author through all the arguments he successively presents in the book. For the remote future generations our time may appear to be a very interesting theoretical case. The direct authority that suppressed human beings from time immemorial has been largely gone. No more serf owners, no more cruel industrialists who could exploit workers in the absence of protective legislation. The family authority also diminished and Church as organization as well as an institution does not tower above individual any more. The individual has finally gained (or received) his freedom!... But is he really free? That is a cornerstone question for Fromm's analysis. The author meticulously studies the peculiar aspects of our modern life, from what the rise of methods of mass production started to require from human beings in the 19th century, to how these requirements had, along with technology, developed in the 20th century. He especially focuses on how requirements of the modern economic machine progressively formed into moral standards for our society and how they forced out the need (and largely the possibility) for direct, overt authority; how these economic requirements now perpetuate and reinforce themselves through political and social institutions in such a way that from the first years of our lives we want to do precisely what the economic machine, and not the human nature, wants us to do: to indulge in obsessive work for most of our life's hours, with only two purposes: 1) to increase the abstract capital, material possessions and to secure the growth of the machine itself, and 2) to be able to spend the results of our work - money - and the small bits of the remaining time on the goods and entertainments produced by this machine. How could it be so? And is it so? When we look at our lives we may at first fail to find any proof of evidence for it. After all we do what we want to do, we decide what our profession should be, what company we shall work for; nobody tells us what model of the car to buy, or which girl to marry... Nobody forces us to anything! And that is very accurate. Nobody. But it does not mean there is not something that persistently suggests, urges us to do what it wants us to do. The special term was later coined for this something - economists now call it informal "institutions". And the set of institutions currently accepted by most members of society form an overwhelming force called the "public opinion". In contrast to the overt authority, which usually tend to demand very precise things from its subordinates, public opinion leaves us enough room for some unimportant choices, which give us the illusion that the choices are truly ours. In reality though most of our really important choices are pre-determined by the way the mass production machine works and what type of servants it needs for its successful operation. The modern technology needs very intelligent man to operate it. It cannot use brutal force any longer since that would hinder man's intelligence, which it now needs so much. It cannot let most humans to develop their power of reasoning - since they

would then rebel against the dictatorship of economic forces. Thus the contemporary economic machine needs man who becomes more and more intelligent ("smart") but never truly develops his reason, who wants to have all the goods this economic machine can produce in order to provide for its continuous growth - and the machine skillfully helps him to want an ever-increasing number of new and different goods and experiences it can produce. It propagates itself and stimulates consumption through techniques of advertisements, propaganda and "success stories". What it does not reveal to us is that most of these stories are successes of the machine, not of human beings in the humanistic sense of achievement. This book largely repeats what Erich Fromm had already said in his earlier works ("Escape from Freedom" and especially "Man for himself") in the analysis of the human nature, current human situation and problems that occur at their junction. Twenty years after the first publication of "The Sane Society", in his final book "To have or to be?" Dr. Fromm sums up these concepts more succinctly (on some 150 pages), though never losing important aspects of his previous works. So for anyone who's mostly interested with a psychological and not sociological aspects of this book I would rather recommend to read "To have or to be?" and then "Man for himself". One aspect of "The Sane Society" that is more elaborated in this book than in his other works is the "Road to Sanity": changes that are necessary in social, political and economic spheres to let the human beings become masters, not slaves, of the technology and capital they created; what changes are required to let each individual realize his creative and loving potential and to stop being converted into programmed robots which follow the dictatorship of the soulless capital, despite having deep inside the ever-present anxiety and neuroses that now so frequently occur. Fromm seeks solution that would help not only the upper and middle classes, but the working class too, every human being. He briefs the reader on the ideas offered by the most and also lesser renowned socialists, quoting them extensively, and suggests that the "Road to sanity" for us should be that what he calls "Democratic Socialism". Unlike many socialists who placed most emphasis in the spheres of political (revolution, the rule of the working class) and economic (nationalization of the means of production and less drastic distribution of income) changes, Fromm explains that unless significant changes also happen in the social sphere (changes in values and increase of faith in abilities and reason of all human beings) any attempts limited to economic and/or political spheres will inevitably fail. He also shows that while economic goal of socialists of the 19th century - to provide better means for living for the working class - has already been accomplished better than many could dream of, the social situation of that class and its genuine self esteem had not largely changed. The only difference is that brutal oppression of the 19th century was substituted with programming the blue and white collar workers with "the law of the free market" mentality which can

be summed up in the following: "If you do not work you will starve, and we offer you choices of work and monetary reward on which you and your family can exist. If you do not like the work we offer for your knowledge and skill level and you do not have enough money and brains to prepare yourself for what you would like to do, or you want to do what we as a society do not value in materialistic sense (teachers, nurses etc) - well that's just too bad for you. But we, the society, have nothing to do with that. This is you who are a failure. Realize it and stick to your destiny and work that you can do. After all somebody have to do the dirty jobs in the factories and on the streets, so why not you?" Although for some this may sound like a normal, fair way of treating individuals, it certainly does not sound so for Dr. Fromm and for many other humanists he quotes. Erich Fromm was far from being naïve and overoptimistic. He accepts that among current economic, political and social institutions the current way of mass production (around which our whole economy is organized), which requires huge organizations and a great deal of specialization of labor, can be changed least. He offers some very practical (and mostly realistic) political, social and also minor economic changes that should help workers as well as managers to become more reasonable and also become less alienated from their work and their whole life. But after reading his truly brilliant analysis of the human nature and current human situation and the way it developed to what it is, his last, relatively short chapter on the "Roads to Sanity", leaves an impression that he himself was aware that what he proposed was not enough, and what would be enough could not be realistically achieved. Dr. Fromm is an analyst par excellence, but he does not have the vigor and ego of Karl Marx to force his ideas and ideals with the revolutionary strength upon "the ones who must be saved". Thus he does not dwell into many details on how the new, sane society shall function, limiting his suggestions only to indicating "possible ways" and some seemingly discrete changes. And that may be a sign that he himself did not believe that something can be fundamentally changed on the gross level. But even if that is true, even if economic machine and profit obsession cannot be restrained in the foreseeable future, this book is still very important as it can at least help some individuals to unveil their reason and thus to [partially] escape the general madness created by the current capitalistic soulless machine. And the larger the number of such individuals is, the more are the chances that society as a whole will gradually adopt a healthier approach to life.

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