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Psychoanalysis and Human Values

Rainer Funk

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As psychoanalysts we are accustomed not to make moral statements and judgments, neither in regard to what patients tell us about how they lived or still live, nor in regard to how they should act to overcome a particular problem or to get rid of a particular symptom. We try to understand and to be sympathetic as to why patients act how they do. And we refuse to be moral counselors. Usually we avoid offering ourselves as a helpful superego, preferring rather to encourage the patient to develop his or her own moral convictions.

As psychoanalysts we seem to have no moral convictions. But this is hardly the reality with us! We have a lot of moral ideas and are convinced of the rectitude of the many values and norms that guide our personal life as well as our professional doings. Striving as we do to communicate an attitude of neutrality, we nevertheless are implementing an implicit ethics most of us are not used to thinking about. Yet we should reflect, in our therapeutic dealings, the moral impact of psychoanalytic theory as well as our moral convictions, because our implicit ethics actually differ in some crucial respects from what is today discussed under the rubric of ethics, norms and values.

1. The ethical impact of psychoanalysis

The impact of psychoanalytic understanding on human behavior I see in at least a threefold light.

(1) A first aspect refers to the question of ethics. The behavioral sciences seduce us to the point where we are interested in behavior per se rather than in the person doing the behaving. There is a great illusion at work in ethical theory, namely that of focusing all interest on behavior and then searching for whatever ethical behavior people can be persuaded of or conditioned to. This flies in the face of our daily psychoanalytic experience. As psychoanalysts we know that any concrete behavior is always equivocal. A person can be destructive to preserve his own life or because he is driven by a deep-rooted hate. In the first case his destructiveness proceeds from an ethical imperative to survive; in the latter for him to act destructively is certainly an immoral act. Moral judgment which is oriented to behavior and in which ethical norms refer to a particular behavior do not really do justice to human beings. What elevates human behavior to the moral level is - from a psychoanalytic point of view - never the act of behavior as such, but the person who behaves in a specific way. Thus it is the person himself who gives his doings a particular intention and moral quality originating in conscious or uncon-



scious strivings. It is this intention which accompanies most of our acts. And it is this intention that from a psychoanalytic point of view is the subject of ethics.

This especially holds true for unconscious intentions which so often motivate our behavior. Since Freud we know we are also responsible for intentions we are not conscious of, but which we can discover by rationalizing about our behavior. According to psychoanalytic insight, moral judgment must refer to these basic intentions which motivate our behavior. And when we speak psychoanalytically of moral values and norms, it is these intentions we are referring to, not the mostly equivocal behavior as such.

(2) A second aspect in which psychoanalysis can contribute to ethics has to do with the binding character of ethics. Today we are confronted with an immense variety of human and moral possibilities, which suggests an arbitrariness of values and norms. First this was confirmed by cross-cultural studies and then by sociological studies in class structure. In the meantime sociological relativism in regard to values and norms has set itself through: there are no values and norms corresponding to an objective human nature any more, or so we are told. Any attempt to derive values and norms from a fixed human nature is interpreted as the outcome of romanticism or of an authoritarian ethics, both of which have to be overcome. Neither God nor tradition nor human nature can constitute values and norms. The valuable and the normative are simply what people acknowledge through the way of life they choose.

One hundred years ago, for example, obedience and submissiveness were ethical values because in an authoritarian economic and social structure such behavior was required. Today we live in socio-economic systems in which a marketing orientation is required. Thus we develop values and norms which serve the ideal of marketing. To be a success on the market one has to be adaptable, flexible, mobile, unattached, without genuine feelings, able to slip into any role and to be identified with whatever traits of personality confer success - independently of one's true identity. The valuable is whatever serves the cause of one's own marketing. We are witnessing a fundamental change of values and norms and it would seem that mankind is endowed with unlimited changeability. Why should there be a human nature from which we can derive objective human values and norms? Does not the changeability of the human species speak for the arbitrariness of values and norms and against ethics having any binding character which goes beyond the given historical situation?

The almost unlimited adaptability and changeability of human beings and the correspondingly immense variety of moral values encountered seem to contradict psychoanalytic observations to the effect that there are values and norms conducive to psychological growth and well-being and that there are others that have the opposite effect. To solve this contradiction one has to distinguish between what is possible and what is good for human beings. Much more is possible than what is good. And only relativism or pragmatism or authoritarianism maintain that what serves their system is eo ipso good. Psychoanalysts should avoid identifying what is possible with what is good; rather they should search for underlying regularities of human development and human well-being and consider their ethical impact.

(3) The third point where psychoanalysis can contribute to ethical theory refers to the question what determines morality. There is a widespread view that would peg morality to knowledge of what is required from us as normal standards of behavior. Our daily



experience as psychoanalysts teaches just the opposite: People usually know very well what they should do and what is adjudged morally right, but they are not able to follow their insight and knowledge. Ethical systems that are primarily interested in what is morally right - so-called normative ethics - neglect the fact that morality is not in the first instance a matter of knowing the norms - the morally expected - but of being able to apply them and of being willing to do so. Or to put it in other words: Morality depends much more on the psychological intention or orientation than on knowing what is morally right.

Today's most favored ethical systems usually do not reflect the most decisive role that psychological structure plays in determining morality. On the contrary, great efforts are made to discuss ethical norms in regard to abortion, death penalty, genetic engineering, euthanasia and so on. All participants in such discussions are convinced to anchor morality by reaching a normative decision. But this holds true only in cases of official permission or of prohibition from a legal standpoint and refers to ethical questions - and most of us are not directly affected by these. Of course it makes sense to search for the morally correct, particularly as in our day huge problems have arisen in connection with what is technologically possible. But it is a fatal mistake to believe that ascertaining the morally correct - the ethical norm - will automatically motivate people to act accordingly.

Psychoanalysis can contribute to avoiding this mistake by subscribing to an ethical theory focused on the role psychological structure plays in morality. In this respect, psychoanalysis has an inner affinity to the ethics of virtue or to narrative ethics. In the history of ethics there is a long tradition - from Aristotle to Thomas Aquinas and Spinoza - which attempted to subsume morality to an ethic of the virtues. These were construed as human potentialities which originate in man himself and whose actualization is predicated on their being practiced. For this ethical tradition, morality is attributed primarily to certain human faculties and not to the knowledge of ethical norms. Augustine writing in this tradition could say: *Ama, et fac quod vis!* - meaning, if you really are a loving person you can do whatever you like - you will be doing the morally good.

By entering a plea for this ethical tradition of the virtues as the precursor to an ethical theory which takes psychological structure seriously, I am in no way defending what is today rationalized as spontaneity but which in reality is, in most cases, simply an inability to endure frustration or postpone a wish. Nor am I enamored of the virtue trend discernible in present day personality theory, because there virtue is passed off as a behavioral trait one has simply assumed. Here virtue is not an integral part of oneself, but a performance by an alter ego one has identified with in order to be successful.

To come back to psychoanalysis and what it can contribute to ethical theory: To the best of my knowledge, Erich Fromm was the first to reformulate in his psychoanalytic theory the idea of an ethic of the virtues. With his theory of character (and of social character) he made values into an integral part of psychoanalytic theory. In so doing, he simultaneously advanced an ethical theory that gave a fruitful turn to the abovementioned psychoanalytic insights.

This Frommian essay shall be the focus in the second part of my presentation.

2. Values as an integral part of psychoanalytic theory

The concept of character in a dynamic sense was first developed by Sigmund Freud. Erich Fromm used Freud's concept of character not only to explain what was meant by permanent neurotic behavior (with which the respective person is identified). In the forties character became for Fromm a synonym for psychological structure. Character now replaced Freud's term „psychological apparatus“ and „libidinal structure.“¹

Fromm used the term 'character' always in the sense of psychological structure or psychological system. Its dual function is to organize our different aspects of being-related and to provide our being-related with psychological energy. Freud's original concept of character was revised by Fromm in two respects: First, the psychological energy canalized in man's character is no longer defined as libidinous (Fromm rejected Freud's libido theory); for Fromm psychological energy does not stem from an instinctual source - sexuality or life and death instincts; rather it originates in man's existential situation and gives rise to human needs as, for instance, the need for relatedness or for a sense of identity. For Fromm therefore man's character or psychological strivings are not rooted in sexuality or in a battle between life and death instincts, but in the psychological need to avoid the unbearable feeling of separation or go crazy.

Second, in regard to character formation too Fromm revised Freud's theory. Fromm looked at character not as a result of instinctual drives but as the outcome of man's psychological needs being played out in a given historical situation. What we seek in our psychological strivings is not an intrinsic aspect of our instinctual apparatus, but the result of a process of identification with economic and social values plus the requirements of a particular historical situation. Thus a sadistic character orientation, for instance, is neither due to oral or anal sexuality nor is it quite normal in a certain stage of psychological development. Hence for Fromm sadism is neither a fixation on a pre-genital stage of development, nor a regression to it, but the outcome of an identification with economic and social structures in which domination is the ruling principle. (I shall come back to this point.)

Freud was no less interested in discovering the very basic drive or drives that determine character traits and concrete behavior than Fromm was to lay bare the very fundamental strivings people share in a particular historical situation. Both were convinced that our behavior is primarily determined by deep rooted strivings - which may be conscious or unconscious. For both, peculiar to the psychoanalytic approach to human behavior is its insistence on tracking down the specific intention or striving that, finally speaking, determines what we think, feel and act. Freud expressed this conviction by means of his concept of an instinctual drive; to the same end, Fromm coined the concept of character *orientation* and elucidated it in terms of the notion of a character *system*.

For both Freud and Fromm what matters is to uncover this basic orientation on the part of the character, since any efforts to change behavior or the systemic system are only likely to succeed if this determining orientation can be changed. As long as au-

¹ By the way: in the late thirties up to *Escape from Freedom* (1941) Fromm first developed a concept of self that had the same function, namely to organize psychic energy according to the different structural psychic aspects: to be related to the world outside, to other persons, to oneself, to what a person should be and must not be, to what one wants to become and so on. He defined the self as an „organized and integrated whole of the personality“ (*Escape from Freedom*, New York 1941, p. 29).



thoritarianism, for instance, is the basic orientation of a character system, no change of personality will be forthcoming unless the authoritarian orientation is first overcome. Hence, to practice disobedient behavior yet not give up the underlying authoritarian orientation, will bring about no deep-seated change. What therefore is idiosyncratic to the psychoanalytic approach to human behavior is its insistence on exposing such basic orientations of character.

According to Freud's concept of character formation, such basic orientations were associated with the well-known libidinous stages. Not so with Fromm. For him man's basic strivings are acquired by adaptation to economic and social requirements. This different understanding enabled Fromm to discover orientations such as Freud and Freudians never were able to see. The paramount character orientations encountered in our day are the authoritarian one, the marketing one, the narcissistic one, the necrophilic one, and the productive one. Time does not permit me to go into detail or to illustrate these findings. Instead, I want to come back to the question of values and morals.

Doubtless these character orientations have a strong impact on our behavior and are - from a psychoanalytic point of view - decisive for any moral judgment we make. Whatever we do, feel or think, our behavior, our attitudes and our character traits can be morally judged in terms of the respective underlying orientation of character. These very basic character orientations lend our actions a certain intentionality that runs to being aggressive or to loving, to competing or to cooperating, etc. Being aggressive or loving is not eo ipso good or bad. Only by considering the underlying impulse, striving or intention are we able to judge whether a particular instance of aggressive behavior is bad or possibly good (as when it serves the productive orientation towards achieving independence and autonomy).

Hence the question arises as to how these orientations can be characterized morally. Freudian psychoanalysis is characterized by an implicit ethics: Whatever furthers development from a pregenital to a genital libido is to be considered good. Accordingly, the therapeutic and the moral aim is to overcome fixations on and regressions to pregenital symptoms and character formations. Fromm - by replacing Freudian libido theory by his concept of social character orientations and a psychoanalysis of relatedness (which differs in some respects from Sullivan's interpersonal psychoanalysis) - abandoned Freud's implicit ethics. According to Fromm, there is no instinct and no intrinsic dynamic propelling a libido to develop from pregenital stages to a genital one. For him, character formation is based on internalization of economic and social requirements. Hence morality has to do with the values and benchmarks of production and social life and their internalized representation in character orientations.

But despite the fact that man's strivings are the outcome of an adaptation to the environment, morality for Fromm is not dictated by economic and social requirements - whatever common sense today may tell us to the contrary. (In our time the good is identified with the successful. And success deemed the highest economic and social value.) For Fromm, however, it is axiomatic that the good is what is good for human beings (and this may differ from what is good for society or for being successful in an economic sense). Thus, although there is for Fromm no instinctual equipment for man's well-being such as there is for Freud, there is an inner psychological law that holds for all human beings, namely that human beings have to be related and that there is an innate primary tendency to develop ways and means of relating that are characterized by



an inner activity or productivity.

Whatever furthers the growth of our own powers by means of which we relate to the outside world and to ourselves in a loving, „sane“ and creative way - that is morally good. Morally bad, on the contrary, is whatever hinders or thwarts this primary tendency towards growth and individuation. Thus while destructiveness, necrophilia, narcissism, maternal fixation are human potentialities, nevertheless they are secondary tendencies that only develop after the primary tendency has failed and the growth syndrome has been perverted into a decay syndrome. As long as the primary tendency is towards work Fromm speaks of a „productive orientation“ (in *Man for Himself*, 1947), of „biophilia“ (in *The Heart of Man*, 1964) or of a „being mode of existence“ (in *To Have Or to Be?*, 1976). Obstruction or thwarting of primary potentiality is bound to lead to a non-productive orientation of the character system.

The terms „primary“ and „secondary tendency“ or „potentiality“ indicate that the psychological system is not principally pegged to the one or the other outcome. Rather it depends on how the socio-economic requirements play out in terms of these potentialities. They have the power to further either the primary or the secondary potentiality. In the first case, the orientation of the character and its traits will be productive; and in the latter, non-productive. Accordingly character traits that actualize the primary potentiality for growth and individuation are seen as virtues and therefore good, the others as vices and therefore bad.

In this reading of morality, Fromm stresses the interaction between psychological potentialities and the determining effects that economy, society, politics, and culture have not only on values and norms but also on the very ability to act morally. The crucial point is that, for Fromm, the environment has the *determining* say in whether a person develops the productive orientation or one of the non-productive orientations, despite there being an innate primary tendency in man for development of the productive orientation.

Most ethical concepts in psychoanalysis reproduced Freud's thinking as expressed in the latter's first instinct theory: that the development of instinct is only the explication of an intrinsic dynamic inherent in the same. Environment, to be sure, has some *influence* on the outcome of the instinct and as to whether a developmental stage can be reached or not. But environment does not *determine* the stages of the development. That there is an oral, anal, phallic and genital stage is for Freud and the Freudians due to instinct and not due to environment. According to Fromm, however, the receptive or hoarding or marketing orientation is due to environment. Although Freud's instinct theory for many psychoanalysts was replaced by other developmental theories, Freud's basic assumption was retained, namely that there is an intrinsic dynamic for development that may only be *influenced*, but is not principally *determined*, by environmental factors.

Fromm's theory of an interaction between environment and psychological potentialities on the one hand, and of the determining quality of environment on the other, implies an additional significance on the part of psychoanalysis for ethical theory that goes beyond that mentioned in the first part of my lecture.

First, not only does the development of psychological abilities - such as cognitive, emotional and affective capacities - depend on reciprocal links with a *determining* envi-



ronment. The same also holds for the development of moral abilities, since the formation of moral abilities is synonymous with the formation of character traits and their productive or non-productive orientation.

Second, whether the determining environment and the economic and social requirements are adequate to man's primary potentiality (and therefore can be adjudged morally good) or whether they are inadequate (and so morally bad) can only be gauged by analyzing the effects the determining environment has on the psychological system. There is no good or bad economy as such; nor any good or bad society as such; nor any intrinsically good or bad religion. It takes analysis of the *effects* of a particular way of producing, or of a particular way of worshiping, or of a particular way of raising children - to make moral judgment possible as to whether the determining environment leads, or has led, to productivity and individuation or to neurotic symptoms and psychological dysfunction, i.e. to a „pathology of normalcy,“ to use Fromm's own coinage for how non-productive orientations play out on social character.

Third, because of the mentioned factor of reciprocity, environment is not simply destiny; to the extent that we are able to shape and create environment, we are also responsible for it. And as surely as we are determined by economic and social expectations and requirements, as surely we are able to determine what and how we want to produce and to arrange our social life accordingly. This at least holds - providing we are not totally alienated - to the point of becoming automatons.

A fourth and last point is directly connected with the one just mentioned: If, from a psychoanalytic point of view, the subject of morality and moral judgment refers to the productive or non-productive *effects* that environment has on character orientation, then psychoanalysis and the question of human values always have a political dimension. According to Fromm, a psychoanalyst cannot sit in his chair only and analyze the inner processes going on in his patients and himself, while remaining unaware of what is going on in his society. As he said in a 1974-interview: „Truth is indivisible. We cannot see reality here and remain closed to it there. That ... makes our search for the truth ineffectual. We can see ourselves rightly only if we can see others rightly, only if we can see them in the context of the social circumstances, which is to say, only if we look sharply and critically at all that is going on around us in the world. This is what love demands of us too.“²

² Erich Fromm, *In the Name of Life. A Portrait through Dialogue*, in: E. Fromm, *For the Love of Life*, New York: The Free Press, 1986, pp. 115-116.