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ERICH FROMM

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Twayne's United States Authors Series

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Erich Fromm



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38

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Preface

PSYCHOANALYST, social theorist and critic, ethical philosopher, teacher and best-selling author: Erich Fromm has been all of these during a long and productive career. As much as any person in our time, he has sought to confront our moral and intellectual dilemmas and to comprehend a humanity that seems resolutely determined to destroy itself. Fromm's work always has been marked by a refusal to yield to the fashionable angst of the twentieth century and by a style that is accessible to educated laymen as well as to scholars. While some critics have deplored both his "optimism" and his popular touch, Fromm is, as Gerald Sykes remarks in *The Hidden Remnant*, one of those people "who actually help make democracy work."

Fromm's ambitious goal, as he told this writer in correspondence, has been to erect "a theory of the various human passions as resulting from the conditions of the existence of man." In pursuit of such a far-reaching theory, he has boldly crossed the boundary lines of familiar fields of knowledge. He has explored the common ground between traditional wisdom and modern experience, between Oriental and Occidental belief systems, between faith and conventional rationalism, between "humanistic" and "scientific" frames of reference. Inevitably, he has drawn anguished cries from some scholars as well as praise from others. Indeed, reading his argumentative critics provides in itself a useful (if sometimes bewildering) introduction to the intellectual ferment of our age.

Now in his seventies, still extremely active, Fromm continues to elude precise classification. When I asked him for a self-definition, he called himself "an atheistic mystic, a Socialist who is in opposition to most Socialist and Communist parties, a psychoanalyst who is a very unorthodox Freudian." In short, no labels quite apply. Like the Spinoza and the Marx he admires, he is an independent and often paradoxical thinker, who strives to be faithful to what he believes are the most humane values of the humane tradition.

Fromm's interests extend into so many fields that most writers who have discussed his work have limited their assessments to



ERICH FROMM

one or another specialized aspect: to his Freudian revisionism, for example, or to his philosophy of politics. These restricted approaches are understandable and often useful. But they do considerable injustice to the dialectical, synthesizing turns of Fromm's thought. Recognizing the hazards of an over-all view, I nevertheless have tried in this book to give proper balance to the full range of Fromm's ideas and methods. I am not a specialist in any of the fields under discussion; rather, my own education and experience have ranged widely through the social sciences and humanities. My approach has been one of critical sympathy and intellectual curiosity, and I trust that it has enabled me to obtain the perspective that Fromm's work demands.

The difficulties of organizing such a diversified body of material are obvious. Within the confines of each individual book or article, Fromm's great strength has been his skill in reconciling apparently antithetical approaches to the study of man. But, from work to work, Fromm shifts his focus, sometimes concentrating his energies in one direction, sometimes in another. Some books partially overlap, and some particular discussions have been repeated, with minor or major modifications, several different times. It seems safe to say that Fromm, who shares Emerson's humanistic affirmation as well as his distrust of mechanized man, shares also his organic perspective—and he carries it over into the formulation and presentation of his ideas.

In order to offer a coherent view of Fromm's development as a thinker, while at the same time indicating the range and interrelationships of his ideas, I have tried to effect a compromise between chronological and thematic treatments. Thus, after a short introductory chapter that suggests some of the principal influences on Fromm's attitudes, each chapter is built around a related cluster of ideas that received their greatest emphasis in a given span of time. Within the limited compass of this book, I make no pretense of examining systematically or in depth the ideas of such major and prolific writers as Freud or Marx. But wherever possible I have attempted to supply a sense of background, and of important critical controversies, relevant to the many themes that Fromm has discussed.

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Contents

Preface	
Chronology	
1. The Sources of Revision and Synthesis	11
2. The Dialectics of Society and Man	19
3. The Nature of Man	47
4. Rediscovering Buried Meanings	65
5. Theories of Transformation	82
6. Freud, Marx, and the Cold War	111
7. Toward a Synthesis of Idea and Action	135
Notes and References	161
Selected Bibliography	169
Index	177



Chronology

- 1900 Erich Fromm born in Frankfurt, Germany.
- 1918- Student, universities of Heidelberg and Munich. Ph.D., Heidelberg.
- 1924
- 1926 Married Frieda Reichmann. Subsequently divorced.
- 1929- Student, Psychoanalytic Institute of Berlin; Lecturer, Psycho-
- 1932- analytic Institute of Frankfurt and Institute for Social Re-
- search, University of Frankfurt.
- 1931 *The Development of the Dogma of Christ.*
- 1932- With International Institute of Social Research, Geneva.
- 1933
- 1934 Emigrated to the United States; became American citizen.
- 1934- With International Institute of Social Research, New York
- 1938 City.
- 1940- Guest Lecturer, Columbia University.
- 1941
- 1941 *Escape from Freedom.*
- 1941- Lecturer, American Institute of Psychoanalysis.
- 1942
- 1941- Faculty, Bennington College.
- 1950
- 1943 Married Henny Gurland (died 1952).
- 1947 *Man for Himself.*
- 1949 Terry Lecturer, Yale University.
- 1950 *Psychoanalysis and Religion.*
- 1951 *The Forgotten Language: An Introduction to the Under-*
standing of Dreams, Fairy Tales, and Myths. Fellow, Faculty,
William Alanson White Institute of Psychiatry. Professor of
Psychoanalysis, National Autonomous University of Mexico;
Director, Mexican Institute of Psychoanalysis.
- 1953 Married Annis Freeman.
- 1955 *The Sane Society.*
- 1956 *The Art of Loving.*
- 1957- Professor, Michigan State University.
- 1961
- 1959 *Sigmund Freud's Mission.*
- 1960 Editor (with D. T. Suzuki and R. De Martino), *Zen Bud-*
dhistism and Psychoanalysis.
- 1961 *May Man Prevail?*



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ERICH FROMM

- 1962 Professor, New York University. *Marx's Concept of Man. Beyond the Chains of Illusion: My Encounter with Marx and Freud.*
- 1964 *The Heart of Man: Its Genius for Good and Evil.*
- 1965 Editor, *Socialist Humanism.*
- 1966 *You Shall Be as Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and its Traditions.*
- 1968 *The Revolution of Hope: Toward a Humanized Technology.*
Editor (with Ramon Xirau), *The Nature of Man.*
- 1970 *Social Character in a Mexican Village* (with Michael Maccoby).
The Crisis of Psychoanalysis.



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ERICH FROMM



CHAPTER 1

The Sources of Revision and Synthesis

I *Youth*

TO BEGIN with a truism that some formalistic critics still seem loath to accept, every writer is the product of a particular time and place. The most useful introduction to the ideas of Erich Fromm is some sense of the kind of home in which he grew up and of the intellectual climate that strongly shaped his professional outlook. Frankfurt-on-Main, where Fromm was born on March 23, 1900, was a Prussian city of venerable traditions, whose origins lay back in the first century after Christ. Militant Protestantism, which was preached there as early as 1522, fused comfortably with strong commercial impulses, for reasons that Max Weber, Fromm himself, and others have tried to explain. By the end of the nineteenth century, Frankfurt was one of the leading business and industrial centers of Europe.

Fromm's own family had deep religious roots, but these were Jewish rather than Protestant. His father Naphtali was the son of a rabbi and the grandson of two rabbis. His mother Rosa's family apparently was descended from Russian emigrés who had been converted to Judaism in Finland. One of her uncles, Ludwig Krause, was a Talmudic scholar of considerable reputation.¹ The Fromm household was, therefore, an Orthodox one; and the boy Erich was a close student of the Old Testament. He recalls how, as a boy, he was "exhilarated" by the compassion and the redemptive note struck repeatedly in the stories of Abraham, Adam and Eve, and Jonah, and especially by the prophets Isaiah, Hosea, and Amos: "not so much by their warnings and their announcement of disaster, but by their promise of the 'end of days,' when nations 'shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.'"²



Although in later life Fromm abandoned all institutionalized religion, the ethical substructure and the moral fervor of Old Testament messianism have remained entrenched in his style and in his thought. "The first time I heard Fromm," psychoanalyst Rollo May once wrote in *Pastoral Psychology*, "I felt that here was a man who spoke with the accents of the Hebrew prophets." In fact, Fromm's evaluation of the impact of Judaism on Sigmund Freud seems equally applicable to Fromm himself: "Freud's Jewish background... added to his embrace of the enlightenment spirit. The Jewish tradition itself was one of reason and of intellectual discipline, and, besides that, a somewhat despised minority had a strong emotional interest to defeat the powers of darkness, of irrationality, of superstition, which blocked the road to its own emancipation and progress."³

But the members of Fromm's family were not all seclusive religious scholars. Jewish families, as well as Protestant ones, lived in commercial society; it was from a Frankfurt ghetto, after all, that the Rothschilds arose to found the foremost banking house in Europe. Naphtali Fromm was an independent businessman, and Rosa's father was a cigar manufacturer. Apparently, secular and temporal urges did not always mesh equitably in the family. In Fromm's recollection his household was a tense one; his father was moody and "over-anxious," and his mother was "depression-prone."

An only child, Fromm himself was caught up in some of the same tensions. He feels that he lived in two distinct worlds at the same time, one which was "pre-modern," Jewish, and traditional, and the other which was the "modern world of industry, commerce and of finance." Retrospectively, he believes that this dichotomized existence, almost unbearable in its emotional polarities, provided the impetus for his own lifelong intellectual aspirations. As both "stranger" and "participant" in a dynamic, capitalist society, he felt impelled to create a fresh and viable synthesis for himself. He could never accept for himself the role of detached scholar or visionary, of one withdrawn from the world of practical affairs. But he could also never understand how a man could consume his energies in making money and delight in that pecuniary fact.

Fromm has never written very much about the details of his own life, although ours certainly is an age of candid confession and some of the most remarkable self-revelations have been



The Sources of Revision and Synthesis

13

penned by psychoanalysts—following the model of Freud himself. But Fromm, rather than emulating Freud's confessional impulses, seems to have taken seriously Freud's remark that there is "a discretion which one owes to oneself." (In his biography of Freud, Fromm also suggests ironically that Freud himself was not quite so candid as some of his disciples profess to believe.)

In one of his few personal reminiscences in print, Fromm recalls that confusion and dismay at private and public tragedies led him to speculate about fundamental questions. He writes that at the age of twelve he was shocked to learn of the suicide of a beautiful and talented woman, a friend of the family. Such an action, he recalls, seemed both monstrous and incredible.

At thirteen, he commenced a study that he feels provided not only a measure of consolation but also the beginnings of important wisdom. He was introduced to the Talmud by the family scholars. He also studied under the humanistic mystic Rabbi Nehemia Nobel (on whom the writings of Goethe had been a major influence), and under the Hasidic scholar and avowed Socialist Salman Rabinkow. Fromm's Talmudic studies were to continue for fourteen years, until he left organized Judaism. But his interest in religious literature, especially in its ethical and humanistic implications, never ended, and he acknowledges the mystic Meister Eckhart as his favorite author. Moreover, still an atheist after forty years, Fromm at sixty-six devoted an entire book, *You Shall Be As Gods*, to an interpretation of the Old Testament and the Talmudic writings which succeeded it.

Fromm was fourteen when World War I began. Again, he recalls, events almost overwhelmed him. He found himself astonished and "struck with the hysteria of hate" that surged through Germany. Relatives and older friends were killed; his amiable Latin teacher metamorphosed into a fanatic; official propaganda reached frenzied peaks of irrationality and bloodlust. Both sides claimed to be fighting for peace and freedom, and "millions allowed themselves to be slaughtered on both sides for the sake of some territory and the vanity of some leaders."

The end of the war brought comfort to the Frankfurt banking houses; but it also saw the genesis of Nazism, the "curve of horror," as novelist Thomas Pynchon has called it, that began



its ascendance under the early Weimar Republic. Fromm, who had pondered the motivations behind suicide and bellicosity, became increasingly interested in political theory and in “the hidden forces which act behind the back of the participants.” In 1919 he became a Socialist, although reluctance to engage in practical politics kept him from joining the Socialist party. Instead, he concentrated on formal study at the universities, with special emphasis on sociology and philosophy.

II *The Intellectual Atmosphere*

Perhaps the best way to understand what Fromm studied in those years is to take a brief overview of the intellectual ferment of the early 1920's, especially developments in the social sciences that strongly influenced his thinking. It was a time of extraordinary excitement in the academic community, and Fromm's writings ever since have been studded with references to those ideas and methods. The comprehensive nineteenth-century formulations of Auguste Comte in France, Herbert Spencer in England, and Karl Marx in Germany had achieved international prominence and influence; and they had opened wide the flood-gates to the analytical study of human behavior and social institutions. Directly relevant, too, were the biological theories of Charles Darwin, which offered dynamic concepts clustered around the idea of evolution, as well as a demonstration of the persuasive power inherent in the mass accumulation of primary data.

The investigators of industrial, technological society and its roots sought to comprehend it through social, political, and economic “processes”—a term which swept rapidly and pervasively into the scientific vocabulary. In a single chapter of *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy*, John Dewey used the word “process” no fewer than eight times. And “evolution” itself, supplanting the eighteenth-century concept of “progress,” was identified as the methodological key that would unlock the secrets of social processes. No field of study could resist this new concept, from Jakob Burckhardt's scientific history, through the anthropologically oriented “higher criticism” of the Bible that reached its apogee of subtlety in Germany after 1890, to the budding field of psychoanalysis.



The Sources of Revision and Synthesis

15

One result of the wide diffusion of theories and methods was that, despite the emergence of anthropology, sociology, and psychology as discrete disciplines, there were numerous bridges being built from one field of study to another. The American Lewis Henry Morgan, for example, one of the first modern anthropologists to desert the armchair for “field work,” was to have his theories of cultural evolution utilized by Marx and Engels in their studies of the economic organization of the family; later, Freud took cognizance of them in his analysis of primitivism and civilization. Emile Durkheim’s concept of “collective representation” (or the “shared idea” of a group of people) was to find its way into German sociology and then into psychoanalytic theory. Marx’s impact was enormously wide-ranging and deep. His substitution of material, “objective” situations for Hegel’s “idealistic” constructs, his depiction of history in terms of class structure and class struggle, his detailed diagnosis of the capitalistic ethos, and his fusion of voluntaristic and deterministic elements in the social process were to permeate all of the social sciences.

Following the dynamic innovations of Marx, Comte, and Spencer, German sociologists Georg Simmel, Max Weber, and Werner Sombart all sought to relate institutions and concrete facts to value orientations and to the larger social context. They too visualized sociology as a potentially generalizing science of man and, explicitly or implicitly, found a focus in social psychology. The ambitious theoreticians wanted to learn the nature of the *laws* that shaped social institutions and generated human psychologies. Freud, coming from another direction, out of neurology and psychiatry, met the sociologists half-way. All psychology, he once remarked, is social psychology—because all of it is interaction between culture and the individual.

Many theorists still concur with Freud’s statement. Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills have explained the importance of social psychology simply and clearly: “The challenge of social psychology, and its great appeal to modern scholars, is that in a time of intellectual specialization and of social and political disintegration, it promises a view of man as an actor in historical crises, and of man as a whole entity. . . . The structural and historical features of modern society must be connected with the most intimate features of man’s self. That is what social psychology is all about.”⁴



III *Psychoanalysis*

Judging from Fromm's subsequent writings, all of these ideas and many of their implications became well known to him during his university studies. The social sciences alone, however, seemed incapable of digging into the roots of individual human behavior. Certainly one of his motives for beginning the study of psychoanalysis, after he received his doctorate from Heidelberg, was that it promised the kinds of answers to human motivations, at deeper levels, that no other field of research offered. Referring back to the suicide episode of his childhood, Fromm has written, "When I became acquainted with Freud's theories, they seemed to be the answer to a puzzling and frightening experience."

Fromm's introduction to psychoanalysis came through didactic analysis in 1925 in Munich, with W. Wittenberg, whose achievements included successful utilization of art as therapy with mute patients. Later Fromm was analyzed by Hanns Sachs (subsequently a biographer of Freud) of the Institute of Berlin. Although Fromm's imagination was aroused because Wittenberg and Sachs, he says, "taught me to turn my attention to the unconscious," he did not feel that either analysis achieved great interpretive success.

Fromm had had no formal medical education when he began his own psychoanalytical training, nor has he had any since. It would be easy to assume that this "gap" in his psychoanalytic education accounted for his later de-emphasis of the physiological roots of personality; some of the critics who have objected to his "de-biologizing" Freud have made precisely this charge. But the matter is complicated. Medical credentials have not always gone hand in hand with a somatic approach to psychoanalytic theory and therapy. Freud's own concepts of the id, ego, and superego bear only the dimmest of resemblances to conventional biology.

Two of the most famous early psychoanalytic schismatics, Alfred Adler and Carl Jung, both disagreed sharply with Freud's sexual, physiological emphasis; so, too, did the "cultural revisionists," Karen Horney and Harry Stack Sullivan, both of whom became associated with Fromm in the 1930's; but all these psychoanalysts had medical degrees. Furthermore, some of Freud's staunchest disciples, none of whom deviated significantly from Freud's instinctual theories, were *not* medically trained. This



The Sources of Revision and Synthesis

17

group included his daughter Anna, and such valued associates as Hanns Sachs, Theodor Reik, and Ernst Kris. Nor, to compound the difficulties of simple cause-and-effect explanation, did Otto Rank have a medical education. Rank's apostasy from Freud was largely attributable to a shift in the *nature* of his biological emphasis. Fromm was setting no precedent, therefore, when he entered psychoanalysis without prior medical education; and he began practicing therapy in Germany as early as 1927.

The United States was to prove, however, a more intractable locale. There, physicians, along with members of other professions, had had a lengthy, arduous struggle to establish standards and licensing procedures as protection against cultists and quacks who for generations had flocked to practice pseudoscientific panaceas. Largely inspired by convictions about professional responsibility, therefore, the American psychoanalysts formed an almost solid wall of resistance against the admission of lay analysts to practice. When Fromm, Theodor Reik, and other experienced analysts emigrated to America in the 1930's, they found that clinical practice was denied to them. "The problem of the lay analyst exiled from Europe," Topeka psychoanalyst Karl Menninger wrote in 1942, "has been an especially painful one." Both Menninger and his brother Roy, highly influential in psychoanalytical groups, made it unmistakably clear on a number of occasions that Fromm's lay status left his qualifications as a psychoanalyst dubious:

Freud's position on this question, outlined in *The Question of Lay Analysis*, needs some clarification because it bears directly on Fromm's own career. Although Freud's researches into psychoanalysis were an outgrowth of his experiences in neurology and psychiatry, he encouraged the training and participation of "lay" analysts. He probably had no choice: rebuffed by the bulk of the medical profession in his efforts to proselytize, he turned elsewhere for converts. His one reservation was that lay analysts should have patients referred to them by medical doctors.

As Freud visualized its future, psychoanalysis was to be more than a "mere handmaid of psychiatry." He believed it could lend insight into art and literature, sociology, philosophy, and many other fields. Apparently, his hope was that specialists from other disciplines would study psychoanalysis and then be in a position to enrich their own fields. Political scientist



Harold Lasswell, for example, studied psychoanalysis and then wrote and lectured widely on the psychopathology of political institutions and politicians themselves. Similarly, Fromm trained in social science and then applied psychoanalytic theory to social institutions and philosophical concepts.

How much medical expertise is necessary for the practicing analyst, other than on questions of referral, remains a moot question. Certainly, the burgeoning of “humanistic” therapies in the 1960’s and 1970’s raises again a host of medical as well as ethical problems. But one writer, Edgar Friedenberg, has suggested that Fromm’s lack of medical training may be an important reason why Fromm’s approach to personality problems (unlike that of so many medically trained psychoanalysts) has been “moral and committed, rather than detached and empirical.”

Fromm’s moral commitment, as indicated earlier, had other sources. Throughout the early 1920’s he was still an Orthodox Jew. At twenty, he became a co-founder of the Jüdische Volksschule in Frankfurt—a school which at one time included Martin Buber on its staff. In 1923, still in Frankfurt, Fromm edited a small Jewish newspaper. In 1926, he married Frieda Reichmann, a physician and psychoanalyst who was to obtain a great reputation in her own right, especially for her clinical research with schizophrenic patients; and for some years the Fromms worked collaboratively in a private hospital in Heidelberg. They were divorced later, but he has always acknowledged learning a great deal from her.

In 1927, Fromm, now a practicing analyst and strict Freudian, broke formally with Judaism. With his multiple credentials in social science and psychoanalysis, his background of biblical and Talmudic studies, his early acquaintance with Zen Buddhism, and his strong scholarly ambitions, he began his publishing career. His first article, “Der Sabbath,” published in 1927, sought to bring together theories drawn from his highly diversified education. As a complex synthesis focused on an unusual historical-ethical problem, this work presaged in miniature the thrust of all his later work.



CHAPTER 2

The Dialectics of Society and Man

I *The Evolution of Ideology*

FROMM'S article "Der Sabbath" appeared in *Imago*, one of several magazines founded by Freud. In the same year, 1927, Freud published his most systematic exposition—and attempted demolition—of religion, *The Future of an Illusion*. Of Fromm's reverence for the older man's towering reputation there could be no doubt: he cited Freud frequently and uncritically, and he constantly reminded the reader that "Freud has shown us" this or that. Despite such obeisance, Fromm's first article also demonstrated the forthrightness and bold synthesis of methods that would stamp all his future work.

The subject of his article is a historical paradox, the apparently contradictory ordinances that the Bible prescribes for Sabbath observance. "If the Sabbath," Fromm asks, "should be a day of rest and recuperation for man, and if the prohibition of work should function as a good deed and not as a denial, how can we explain some of the prohibitions for this day, which obviously lead to an opposite tendency?"¹ For example, a prohibition like the one against leaving the house seems to be a "burden" rather than a "convenience," and scriptural punishments for Sabbath violations sometimes seem excessively severe. For Fromm, the explanation offered in Exodus, that man should rest because God rested after six days of labor, is anthropomorphic to the point of "blasphemy."

Fromm's own explanation mixes anthropology, philosophy, and psychoanalytic theory. The biblical conception of work, he states flatly, expresses a fundamental relationship between man and nature. The relationship might be literal—economic—or it might be symbolic. In the second instance, Freud's Oedipal construct is seen as helpful: when man, the farmer, "coerces"



nature, he is committing a symbolic act of incest against Mother Earth. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, but always in veiled form, such episodes as the father-son conflict in the Garden of Eden suggest that “incestuously determined patricide” was the original crime of mankind. The Bible, says Fromm, suppressed ideas that had been transparently clear in older Babylonian myths.

As opposed to such “sacrificial” prohibitions attached to Sabbath observance, there are also “life-affirming” injunctions. Beginning with Isaiah, the Bible admonishes believers to eat and dress well, to “approach the Sabbath joyfully.” To resolve the sacrifice-and-joy contradiction, Fromm employs dialectics. On the one hand, work is connected with punishment through the concept of Original Sin, when man was expelled from the pleasures of Eden (“the womb”). On the other hand, the work-prohibition implies the restoration, at least temporarily, of the “paradise-like, hence workfree-state” for man, “*the reconstruction of the harmony of the womb’s environment.*”

Fromm’s reasoning seems both forced and inadequately substantiated, for his metaphors are more grandiose than persuasive. And his language, as he was to confess in later years, is rather clumsily academic. Despite Fromm’s reliance on the theories embodied in Freud’s *Inhibition, Symptom and Anxiety*, it appears clear that the speculations of Otto Rank and Karl Marx (whom Fromm does not cite) figure strongly in Fromm’s interpretation. Rank, in *The Trauma of Birth*, had argued that pre-Oedipal tensions in the newborn baby were crucial. Freud’s early reaction to this theory was uncertainty; later, he condemned it. But Fromm’s reference to natural states of harmony and disharmony indicates that he was impressed; in later writings, he would modify and expand this conception. As for Marx, his presence, too, can be felt. There is, to be sure, a strong dialectical turn in Freud’s thought; but Marx more than Freud seems to have been the likely inspiration for what Fromm calls his own “dynamic explanation for the inner relationship between opposite elements.” And Marx more than Freud surely lies behind Fromm’s comment about the economic significance of Sabbath prohibition (productivity of labor had to have reached the stage where man could afford the luxury of a work-free day).

In 1929, Fromm moved to Berlin to study at the Psychoanalytic Institute, from which he graduated in 1932. His teachers



The Dialectics of Society and Man

21

there included some eminent Freudian scholars: Theodor Reik, Karl Abraham, Sandor Rado, and Franz Alexander. (Freud himself Fromm never met, then or in later years.) Simultaneously, Fromm lectured at several institutes in Frankfurt and continued to write. In his next two important publications, he refined and extended his examination of ideological meanings. He introduced a powerful Marxian weapon of analysis: the dynamics of social class, set inside the conditions of historical change. And, building on the insights of Emile Durkheim, Freud, and others, Fromm began to create his own theory of character formation. As one more mark of his growing independence, he now took direct issue with two of his former teachers, Franz Alexander and Theodor Reik.

In another article that appeared in *Imago*, "The Psychology of the Criminal and of Punishing Society," Fromm concludes that there are fundamentally two kinds of crimes: those that are primarily economic, or "rational-egoistic," in motivation, and others that might be termed "irrational-sexual." These two types are seen as extremes at the ends of a behavioral continuum; most crimes are somewhere in between, the result of a mixture of "libidinal with egoistic strivings." The puzzle, says Fromm, is why most people who are economically underprivileged, and thus unable to gratify perfectly normal wants, do *not* commit crimes.

His answer is a statement of social psychology—society implants certain ideals, enabling most people to prefer poverty to dishonesty. In psychoanalytical terms, some people *do* become criminals because their "superego formation is not all or only imperfectly successful." For the precise mechanisms of unconscious motivation, he refers the reader to *The Criminal, the Judge and the Public*, written in 1928 by psychoanalyst Franz Alexander (later one of the pioneers of psychosomatic medicine) and the criminal lawyer Hugo Staub. Alexander and Staub had diagnosed the etiology of crime through a shrewd Freudian variation on the "social contract" of John Locke and Thomas Jefferson. People, according to this theory, seek to establish equilibrium between the demands of the id and the pressures of the superego; and they make a concession to the social order. Albeit reluctantly, they renounce instinctual needs, hoping for compensatory gratification from society. But they retain the "right of revolution" (as in the Declaration of Independence);



and, when gratification (justice) is not forthcoming, they consider the contract broken. Instinctive drives then operate without restraint.

Alexander and Staub had postulated two kinds of criminals, the “neurotics,” whose etiology is primarily psychological, and the “normal” ones, whose etiology is mostly social. Here, Fromm disagrees. “Any unconscious impulse can be extensively rationalized,” he insists. “Only the study of the unconscious of the criminal personality can explain.” His argument specifically conjoins Marx with Freud: “Sublimation often fails not because of the lack of individual psychic ability, but rather because of the economic circumstances. The proletariat’s hostile impulses can leave them ‘narcissistically undernourished.’” Thus the question of accountability becomes moot, since both social and psychological pressures are operative and, in fact, fuse.

To Fromm, the archaic penal code persists because the ruling class uses it to bring the masses “in a situation of spiritual ties and dependence on the ruling class, or its representatives, so that they obey and subordinate themselves without the use of force.” The values of the ruling class are thus internalized by those who are ruled. One suspects that Franz Kafka would have approved of Fromm’s concluding metaphor: “The penal code . . . is the paddle on the wall which shows even the good child that the father is a father and the child a child.”

Fromm said recently that in the early 1930’s he was still orthodox in his therapeutic practice, still trying to force facts into preestablished theory. His article on crime clearly shows these signs of strain, for Fromm is struggling to incorporate Freud’s id-ego-superego psychic topology into his own increasingly radical formulations. Freud regarded psychoanalysis as the potential center of a unified behavioral science, but Fromm now was pointing outward, toward the crucial role of social phenomena in the formation of human personality. Even while he admitted that the ruling class clings tenaciously to its “purposes and prerogatives,” he found signs of hope in the evolutionary and increasingly humane tendencies of criminal justice.

But in 1931 he was still asserting his psychoanalytic orthodoxy. In *The Development of the Dogma of Christ*, published that year, he adheres scrupulously to Freud’s dictum about the illusions of religion: it is infantile psychic gratification, he says, transferred to collective fantasy. As he now challenged some of



The Dialectics of Society and Man

23

Theodor Reik's ideas, he assured readers that this "opposition certainly does not depend upon any difference in the psychoanalytic presuppositions as such."

Reik had concluded in 1927, in "Dogma and Compulsion," that religion and individual compulsion-neurosis patterns bear startling resemblances. According to Fromm, Reik's "error" was that he tried "to understand people on the basis of a study of dogma," whereas it is necessary "to understand dogma on the basis of a study of people." With a nod to sociologist Georg Simmel, who had rejected the notion of any summary "group" psychology, Fromm maintains that "the social-psychological investigation can study only the character matrix common to all members of the group, and does not take into account the total character structure of a particular individual."² Herein lies the kernel of Fromm's "social character" theory, later systematized in *Escape from Freedom* and exemplified experimentally in *Social Character in a Mexican Village*.

To study real people necessitates, for Fromm, appraisal of social and economic facts, rather than a reasoned argument by analogy. His approach in *The Dogma of Christ* is to outline three principal stages of the dogma, from primitive Christianity to the Nicene Council of A.D. 325; to set each stage of belief in historical perspective with a discussion of political and economic conditions (with careful class differentiation); and then to translate each dogmatic concept into psychoanalytic terms. From what conditions did particular dogma originate, and what were the nature and purpose of each "psychic gratification" for believers? In later years, David Riesman cited *The Dogma of Christ* as a clear paradigm of the way Fromm diverged from the classical Freudians on the subject of social issues.³

The major points of Fromm's analysis may be summarized briefly. (1) In the Augustan era, the exploited proletarian Jews sought to collaborate with the middle class in a revolt against Rome. When the middle class compromised and revolutionary aims collapsed, the lower-class radicals turned to fantasy for gratification. They gravitated toward a gospel of future judgment which was a compound of internal brotherhood and hatred for the oppressive authorities.

For the suffering masses, the "adoptionist" theory, in which Jesus became the Messiah by a distinct act of God's will, afforded a means of identification: Christ was elevated to God, and "in



their unconscious, this crucified god was themselves.” In this way, an outlet was also provided for expressing hostility against the father-figure. Finally, the death on the cross expiated the guilt that was inculcated by the death-wish against the father.

(2) By the end of the second century, the Roman Empire had become a “feudal” class-state, with citizenship generally available, and an emperor cult serving to unify the far-flung population. The Roman goal was reconciliation of Christians with the state, and the ruling class itself joined the faith. Christianity lost its revolutionary character, as well as the ethical core that had been expressed through a brotherhood of the oppressed. The ruling class formulated a new dogma of Jesus: man had not become God; rather, God had become man. Jesus now symbolized man’s “tender, passive tie to the father.” Man should love and submit. Aggressive impulses that once had been directed against authorities now were turned back on the people themselves. Self-annihilation of the Son became the center of Christian dogma.

(3) In the definitive dogma of the Catholic Church, all anti-authoritarian and adoptionist constructions dropped away. The last competitive theory, Arianism, held that God is One, and that the Son was of a different essence. But at Nicaea, Athanasius argued triumphantly that the Son and God shared the essence and whole nature. Unification was completed.

The dogma’s tortuous progression through redefinition and crystallization, says Fromm, was the product of men, needs, and changing times. Its convolutions can only be understood dialectically, through an examination of solid facts and unconscious motives. Ten years later, in *Escape from Freedom*, Fromm extended his historical analysis into the Reformation and to modern times—but with some significant changes in his approach to human needs and realities. Twenty years after that, when *The Dogma of Christ* itself was translated and reprinted, Fromm pointed out that he was no longer quite an orthodox Freudian or quite so staunchly an environmentalist. By 1961, even his definition of “ideology” had changed.⁴

But for several more years, after *The Dogma of Christ*, until about 1937, Fromm remained in the fold of faithful Freudians—or at least he so pictured himself. Articles he wrote during these years actually suggested that he was deviating in more and more ways from Freud and that his own theories were beginning to



The Dialectics of Society and Man

25

take coherent shape. Freud, by stressing the universality and primacy of the Oedipal sexual triangle, and by insisting that any advanced civilization acted repressively on libidinal drives, had evolved a theory of culture that was almost monolithic. His thinking, as Philip Rieff has suggested in *Freud: The Mind of the Moralizer*, really was antihistorical. But Fromm was absorbed with historical change and with the new insights from cultural anthropology; almost everything he wrote in this period intermingled socioeconomic processes with psychodynamics.

Prime examples were "The Theory of Mother Right and its Relevance for Social Psychology" and an essay on Robert Briffault's book *Mothers*, where Fromm began assembling his ideas on the mythological and sociological implications of matriarchal theory. Fromm had touched on this topic when discussing "incest" in his Sabbath article; now he underlined its significance by arguing that "the psychic basis of the Marxist social program was predominantly the matricentric complex." These ideas will be discussed more fully in conjunction with *The Forgotten Language*, which Fromm wrote in 1951, outlining his own post-Freudian version of the meaning of the Oedipus legend and of Sophocles' trilogy.

On several occasions in the 1930's Fromm delivered direct attacks on familiar concepts of, and attitudes about, Freud himself. In "The Social Background of Psychoanalytic Therapy," he said that Freud was not, widespread belief to the contrary, liberal toward sex; Freud's philosophy actually was "puritanical." This theme he would later develop in *Sigmund Freud's Mission* (1959). In "The Method and Function of an Analytical Social Psychology," Fromm argued that socioeconomic changes not only could act as potent determinants of individual behavior—they might modify the instinctual structure itself. Freud, he says, rejected the idea of a "social instinct," while Marx "did not go into any detail about the quality of various drives and needs." But he was certain that Marxism and psychoanalysis were not irreconcilable, and that critics like Bertrand Russell, who argued that the Freudian "drive for love" and the Marxian "drive for money" represented an unbridgeable polarity misinterpreted the thrust and depth of both thinkers.

Because "instinctual structure" continued to occupy a prominent place in Fromm's formulations, his positions during these years won favor with some writers who felt that Freud was



fundamentally on the right track. A striking example was Herbert Marcuse, himself a highly independent theorist who also sought to bridge Freud and Marx. Assessing Fromm's articles of the 1930's, Marcuse praised his "valuable service" in bringing to light the "latent" sociological critique in Freud. Fromm, he said, had vividly demonstrated the link between socioeconomic and instinctual structures; this demonstration was valuable because "sharpening of the psychoanalytical concepts means sharpening their critical function, their opposition to the prevailing form of society."⁵ Marcuse's estimate of Fromm was to turn increasingly negative as Fromm gradually became identified with two sharp revisionists of Freudian theory, Karen Horney and Harry Stack Sullivan. By the late 1930's, Fromm no longer considered himself a strict Freudian in theory or therapy.

II "Neo-Freudianism"

Asked in 1966 about his connection with "Neo-Freudianism," Fromm replied, "I've never actually been happy about that label." Aside from personal reasons (Fromm always has preferred to think of himself as a completely independent thinker, rather than as a member of any "school"), Fromm is correct in believing that the term is imprecise. But ever since he settled in the United States in the 1930's and began his association with two other psychoanalysts, fellow German emigré Karen Horney and American Harry Stack Sullivan, the label "Neo-Freudian" has been applied to all three; and it has stuck.

They worked together and they obviously learned a great deal from one another. They concurred in disputing the efficacy of Freud's "dispassionate" mode of administering psychoanalytic therapy. While they agreed with Freud about the importance of childhood experience and trauma, they stressed more than he did the importance of problems derived from adult experience. Above all, they shared a belief that Freud overestimated the role of "instincts" in personality formation; and, in fact, they rejected the Freudian concept of human instinct altogether. All three placed greater emphasis on the critical role played by social and cultural factors, on what Sullivan called "interpersonal relations."

Despite these similarities, "Neo-Freudianism" was a vague and somewhat misleading term. In the first place, it blurred important distinctions in temperament and method, distinctions



The Dialectics of Society and Man

27

which became more apparent in later years. In the case of some other psychoanalysts who have been called “Neo-Freudians,” Abram Kardiner and Franz Alexander for example, fundamental differences have been even more profound. Besides, the path of psychoanalytic theory has been so convoluted that influences have gone in many directions: there are consequential ways in which Fromm has more in common with Carl Jung or Wilhelm Reich, for instance, than with Horney or Sullivan. And finally, the word itself, “Neo-Freudian,” seems to connote more a revival of Freud’s ideas than an attempt to make major changes in Freudian theory. It would fit more appropriately the celebrants of Freudian orthodoxy in the 1950’s and 1960’s. But, to repeat, the term has stuck. Fromm himself has used it unapologetically in an article on the history of psychoanalysis, and a recent, sophisticated, and generally sympathetic account of Fromm, Horney, Sullivan, Kardiner, and Alexander (and Harold Lasswell), places the term squarely in the title.⁶ Therefore, it is worthwhile to examine briefly what is meant by the “social” revision of Freud and to glance at the general formulations of Horney and Sullivan.

Freud himself instituted the study of the relationship between the individual and society as early as 1913 in *Totem and Taboo*, and he made other contributions in such later works as *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* and *Civilization and Its Discontents*. The “ego,” which Freud defined as that aspect of the self which tests reality, became the center of an almost special field of study inside psychoanalysis, as developed by such faithful Freudians as Heinz Hartmann, Anna Freud, and Ernst Kris. “Ego-psychology” was one cornerstone in the socializing of psychoanalysis, although Fromm recently (in “The Crisis of Psychoanalysis”) charged that Hartmann and his colleagues have distorted some of Freud’s most significant, and radical, concepts.

Freud, however, always insisted on the primacy of instinctual drives even though his later work emphasized “life” and “death” drives at the expense of the id-ego-superego group of concepts. The Freudian “id” (based on Georg Groddeck’s *Es*, or “It”), was a “seething cauldron” of undifferentiated desires. The id demanded gratification at all costs, while society demanded subordination of individualistic to group needs; and the result was an inevitable, and interminable, tug of war. Without civili-



zation, man was a savage beast; but the price of civilization—*any* civilization—was neurosis, anxiety, depression. Erotic drives and conflicts were basic in this scheme, although sex was hardly, despite the assertions of many popularizers and critics, the sum total of Freudian theory.

Some of Freud's early followers, absorbing ideas either from the rapidly developing social sciences or from their own clinical observations, or both, disagreed about fundamental points. Alfred Adler in particular (for motives which apparently included his own personal sense of inferiority and his strong political convictions) abandoned the instinctual-sexual core of personality theory. Adler substituted as guiding human motives the quest for, and frustration of, power. He was not especially sophisticated in sociology, but his "style of life" concept, his awareness of the significance of social status and the need for "recognition by others" were important bridges toward a new, dynamic psychology. "We cannot comprehend the psychic activities," Adler said, "without at the same time understanding . . . social relationships." Adlerians still argue heatedly, and with justification, that his ideas were influential on writers like Horney and Fromm.⁷

Another important early progenitor of interpersonal theory was Wilhelm Reich. His *Character Analysis* (1933) was the first really systematic study of "character traits" as the product of interaction between the individual and society. "Every social order," wrote Reich, "creates those character forms which it needs for its preservation. . . . it is a matter of a deep-reaching process in each new generation, of the formation of a psychic structure which corresponds to the existing social order, in all strata of the population."

Now Fromm moved to America in 1934 when the Institute for Social Research, for which he had been working in Geneva, transferred its headquarters to New York City. Since Fromm, Horney, and Sullivan soon began working together, their efforts have sometimes been called the "Americanization" of psychoanalysis. But some of the purely German roots have already been described, and the Fromm-Horney-Sullivan triumvirate was two-thirds German to begin with: the theories of Fromm and Horney had acquired important "social" dimensions before either emigrated to the United States. No question, however, but that these theories did find fertile soil here, in the form of



The Dialectics of Society and Man

29

American social and economic conditions, and in the pre-existence of a substantial body of knowledge in the social sciences. As one writer has phrased it, these factors “gave the revisionists the impulse, the possibility, and the model for their subsequent development.”⁸

Karen Horney had taught for many years at the Psychoanalytic Institute in Berlin, as had Wilhelm Reich. As early as 1924, she was bluntly criticizing Freud’s blatantly masculine biases; and she shortly became the most original contributor to a sophisticated psychoanalytic theory about women as women (not, as Freud seemed to believe, as men without penises). Quite likely, she was an important influence behind Fromm’s rejection of Freud’s “anti-feminism,” although not necessarily the *major* influence. At any rate, it is interesting that in the 1960’s Fromm declared that Freud’s greatest single error was his psychoanalytic theory about women.⁹

In disputing Freud on this point, Horney stressed the role of environmental conditioning in shaping women’s “feminine” approach to life. She found persuasive documentation in the findings of the new cultural anthropology. Edward Sapir urged in 1930 a fusion of insights among the various social sciences, and the succeeding decade witnessed an outpouring of cross-cultural studies from Margaret Mead, Ralph Linton, Ruth Benedict, Clyde Kluckhohn, and others. All these writers (sometimes themselves called “Neo-Freudian Anthropologists”) offered evidence about the wide range of effects that different cultures could have on individual psyches.

The implications went beyond “female” psychology: the very concept of “normality” was called into question. And, if “normality” was a relative conception, by what standards could anyone identify “neurosis”? When Horney turned to examining “actual life conditions,” she abandoned one cardinal Freudian tenet after another. She jettisoned Freud’s “biologism,” including libido theory—the notion of a fixed quantity of available “energy” that might be directed inward or outward. She challenged his dualistic tendencies, his mechanistic approach to human relationships, and his sternly amoral attitude toward patients.

In *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time* (1937), Horney diagnosed Western capitalism, especially in its virulent American form, as a breeding ground for neurotic competitiveness (“neu-



rotic” because it generated excessive rigidity and also thwarted people’s abilities to reach their “potential”). Children everywhere, she said, were born with a love-and-fear ambivalence; and the way the balance swung depended mostly upon cultural attitudes as transmitted through the family. Life was largely a series of conflicting tendencies to move towards, against, or away from people. Conflicts of this kind bred “anxiety,” and the need to fend off anxiety feelings led to the formation of “escape mechanisms.”

But given ample love, she argued, the worst of this struggle might be ameliorated. Despite the primacy of childhood experience, situational factors kept changing; her therapy became increasingly oriented toward dealing with the patient’s perception of the world in the here and now—too much so, ultimately, for Sullivan and his followers. Aside from Horney’s optimism (which was never as ingenuous as her detractors made out) and her apparent emphasis on examining “consciousness” rather than probing “unconsciousness,” she raised other problems for more traditional colleagues and critics.

In confronting an old psychotherapeutic problem, the lengthy time spent in analysis, she sought ways to shorten the duration of treatment, and even made a serious attempt to justify “self-analysis.” Such an idea was, of course, horrifying to those who believed that the analyst’s couch and the laborious pursuit of buried meanings were the very soul of therapy. Horney was accused of oversimplifying complexities, of offering “lending-library psychoanalysis,” and of making “social adjustment” a fashionable and accessible accessory for the troubled middle class.

How many of Horney’s ideas run parallel to Fromm’s should become obvious in later chapters of this book. Points of divergence he himself has identified on several occasions. He found her “social” theory too general and inadequately grounded in clear conceptions of social class or of historical change. He thought she accepted “cultural relativism” too uncritically, and that she never explained where she believed an individual’s “potential” came from. She herself, after moving disputatiously from institute to institute and finally founding her own, died in 1952.

As for Harry Stack Sullivan, nobody ever accused him of oversimplification. Even his ardent admirers admit that he was



The Dialectics of Society and Man

31

one of the worst writers in the history of psychoanalytic thought. The language problem with Sullivan was not the mystical and pseudomystical diffuseness that chokes much of the writing of Carl Jung and Otto Rank; his difficulty was an overspecialized, super-technical preciseness. Unlike Horney (and, to a large extent, Fromm), Sullivan always addressed himself to his peers, assuming their intimate familiarity with the terminology of social psychology and of physiology. His books and papers, so the Sullivan cliché goes, breathe “the odor of the clinic.”

Such a style of low-level concreteness is as unfortunate for most readers as are the high-level abstractions of many philosophers and literary critics. But it is understandable since, as with Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, Sullivan’s theoretical schemes were rooted directly in clinical experience; and they are always related closely to that hermetic world. A student of William Alanson White and Adolf Meyer in America, Sullivan’s first success came with “reaching” schizophrenic patients. (Freud had discounted the possibility of fruitful therapy with them.) From clinical tests and observations, Sullivan built his “interpersonal theory” of psychiatry.

Up to a point, Sullivan’s general theory of human experience paralleled Karen Horney’s. Experience is perpetual, he said: from birth onward, every individual is establishing contact with, “inter-acting” with, absorbing attitudes from, reacting to, others. But he pursued interaction to its ultimate implications. In an important sense, he concluded, men *are* their experience. As Sullivan conceived it, following on the speculations of American social-psychologist George Herbert Mead, “self” is not really an entity so much as it is a dynamism, originating and functioning “interpersonally.”

Sullivan emphasized the “wholeness” of personality; but, like Horney, he never fully systematized its workings. He bifurcated human purposes, for example, into (1) the pursuit of satisfactions (which were directly associated with bodily organization) and (2) the pursuit of security. All these strivings are basically biological; but they are shaped, immediately and continually, by parental judgments, examples, teachings. This cultural conditioning of raw biological material so fuses heredity and environment that the terms really have no separate meanings at all.

His theory then blends social psychology still further with



physiology. As childhood conflicts develop between personal strivings and culturally approved patterns, anxiety develops; and it brings concomitant somatic manifestations. Conversely, purely physiological needs—hunger and stomach contractions, for instance—breed anxieties with psychological components. Hence Sullivan, like such psychosomatic theorists as Franz Alexander, Flanders Dunbar, and Hans Selye, stressed the permanent interaction of psyche and soma: the individual is biosocial and inextricably bound up with culture and its derivatives.

There really was no place in Sullivan's scheme for Freud's instinct and libido theories. Even such key Freudian terms as "preconscious" and "unconscious" processes were transposed by Sullivan into "selective inattention" and "disassociation," conceptions that were, presumably, less metaphysical and more accessible to clinical investigation, diagnosis, and therapy.

Again, some parallels between Sullivan and Fromm become evident later in this book—parallels that Fromm points out over the years. That he never shared Sullivan's predilection for intensive clinical investigation seemed less important to Fromm than their agreement on the significance of "inter-personal" relations and their separate quests for human "wholeness." Fromm held important positions at both Sullivan institutes, the William Alanson White Institute and the Washington School of Psychiatry.

Fromm's major disagreement with Sullivan's ideas came years later, after Sullivan's death (1949) and the posthumous publication of Sullivan's later writings. Both men developed dynamic theories of "self," but Fromm came to believe that the Sullivan version was totally swallowed up in the "socialization" process. Sullivan had become a victim, Fromm felt by 1955, of the very conditions he was trying to describe. For Fromm, a truly "objective" theory required the addition of historical and philosophical perspectives. But these estimates were to come later. In the late 1930's, Fromm was still working out his own theories step by step; and his first two American articles, "The Social Philosophy of 'Will Therapy'" and "Selfishness and Self-Love," both appeared in 1939 in Sullivan's journal, *Psychiatry*.

III Social Character

Fromm's two 1939 articles examined some implications of the psychotherapist's role and the nature and meaning of love



The Dialectics of Society and Man

33

relationships. Both, therefore, were concerned with mental health and both took sharp issue with conventional psychoanalytic attitudes. "Will therapy" was the name Otto Rank had given to his own psychoanalytic approach; and Fromm, in "The Social Philosophy of 'Will Therapy,'" scrutinized not only Rank's special premises but also the premises of *any* therapist. No therapist, he argues, can be totally "objective" with a patient. Inevitably, psychoanalysts are subjective about such basic concepts as "health" and "neurosis." Surely, he says, the psychoanalyst's own social philosophy importantly influences his therapeutic method and his conception of what constitutes "cure."

In "Selfishness and Self-Love," Fromm took a fresh look at a problem that had plagued philosophers for centuries: what is the relationship between love for oneself and love for other people? After glancing at what Calvin, Kant, Freud, and others had commented, Fromm concludes that the familiar polarity between "self" and "others" is false. There is such a thing as "narrow self-interest," and it is indeed antithetical to loving anyone else; but it is equally opposed to one's "true" self-interest. For a paradigmatic statement of this point, he cites Spinoza: "The more each person is able to seek his profit, that is to say, to preserve his being, the more virtue does he possess." The key lies in the interpretation of the word "profit." Conceived narrowly, as *material* interests, it sets up barriers against personal growth as well as against deep feelings for other people. Fromm's Spinozan outlook strikingly parallels that of Martin Buber, the Jewish theologian and philosopher whom he had admired in his youth;¹⁰ for the psychological base on which Fromm's argument rests is that a person needs the capacity to love before *any* love can take place. To "love oneself" is to affirm humanness, a quality that is the necessary precursor to loving another. The other loved one then can become an "incarnation of essentially human qualities."

The theoretical positions taken in these articles were extremely important for Fromm's later work. Herbert Marcuse has stressed the seminal significance of the point about the analyst's "subjectivity"; in recent years, the unorthodox psychoanalyst Thomas Szasz has pushed the relativistic implications of the idea still farther. Fromm himself has incorporated the passages from "Selfishness and Self-Love" into several subsequent books, and



they are intrinsic in his more extended discussions of both “the self” and “love.”

In both articles, Fromm blended his theoretical discussion with references to immediate practical applications. He felt that “will therapy,” which had gained considerable popularity among certain occupational groups, represented a dangerously authoritarian direction. He felt that misconceptions about “self-love” and “self-interest” had become increasingly pervasive and increasingly destructive. And he issued stern warnings on both counts—as later discussions of these implications indicate.

In other words, even as Fromm was developing the ideas that became integrated into his total theory, he was evidencing deep concern about contemporary events and their ethical consequences. This fusion of purposes had always been present in Fromm’s work, but it was becoming more apparent in the late 1930’s. For some critics, the fusion has been one of his great strengths; for others, there has been altogether too much strain between his scientific ambitions and his humanitarian presuppositions. Some have insisted, in fact, that Fromm’s science has collapsed under the weight of his ethical imperatives. Fromm tends to reject the polarity itself, for he does not see “science” and “ethics” as totally distinct worlds of discourse since the unifying factors are man himself and the totality of his relationship to nature.

Fromm was working to create a systematic “theory” at this time: but, as he wrote in 1941, the press of political events necessitated a revision of his approach and of his time schedule. He was forced to “interrupt” his primarily theoretical efforts because of the immediately threatening phenomenon of totalitarianism. Over the ensuing years, the “theory” did emerge, although in piecemeal form. But in 1941 he gathered some largely completed phases of his theory and used them to examine an urgent topical problem: “freedom.” The resulting book, *Escape from Freedom*, is a remarkably ingenious blend of purposes, as well as of techniques. Ironically, the unexpected focus of “freedom” ultimately became the center of his theoretical conceptions anyway. In this sense, since he was building on directly “practical” considerations, Fromm demonstrated clearly just how “organic” a thinker he was.

In *The Dogma of Christ* in 1931, with its intermingled analysis of human needs, systems of belief, and socioeconomic data,



The Dialectics of Society and Man

35

Fromm had already demonstrated his nascent methodology. Formal ideologies, he had argued in that book, really were the social and political equivalents of individual rationalizations; and he had tried to explain, by historical example, the process by which the private had been translated into the public. In a 1932 article, Fromm employed the terminologies of both Freud and Marx to explain the kind of process he was trying to systematize. His objective, he said, was “to understand the instinctual apparatus of a group, its libidinous and largely unconscious behavior, in terms of its socioeconomic structure.”¹¹

By 1941, with almost a decade of additional work and thought behind him, Fromm was ready to present a more comprehensive explanation of his method. *Escape from Freedom* embodied the method, which he called “social character,” inside an analysis of modern institutional and ideological evolution. Its theoretical form was outlined in an appendix to the book. Any given society, Fromm explains, transplants through all of its “educational” mechanisms a cluster of values, beliefs, and modes of operation. Inevitably, most members of a group acquire a large number of traits of a substantially similar nature. These shared aspects of character, which are a selection of social possibilities and which never constitute all of any particular individual’s traits, he calls the “social character.” He defines it as “the essential nucleus of the character structure of most members of a group which has developed as the result of the basic experiences and mode of life common to that group.”¹²

“Essential nucleus,” Fromm says; therefore, man is “primarily a social being,” one who is “historically conditioned.” But he emphasizes that he is not posing a polarity of cultural-versus-biological determinants. He concurs with Harry Stack Sullivan’s argument that the question “heredity-or-environment?” is artificial and meaningless; the one functions always and inseparably inside the other. Indeed, Fromm’s theory is partially predicated on assumptions that seem to resemble those of Horney and Sullivan. Like Horney, he speaks of “potentials” at birth; like Sullivan, he refers to an original human “dynamism” that undergoes a reciprocal and continuing interrelationship with society. But Horney, Fromm has observed, was vague about “potentials”; and Sullivan, he has remarked in recent years, seems to have postulated a “dynamism” in which the self itself totally dissolves.



Fromm insists that there are human *needs*, which exist apart from the obviously physiological drives, and are present prior to any socializing process. He calls them “psychological qualities,” and he cites the most crucial as “tendencies to grow, develop and realize potentialities.” These needs, he says, are psychologically equivalent to “identical biological tendencies.” A tendency to grow, for example, leads to the “desire for freedom and hatred against oppression.” Thomas Jefferson’s maxim about man’s “inalienable rights,” which serves as one of several epigraphs introducing *Escape from Freedom*, is thus more than political philosophy for Fromm; it is, he suggests, “founded in inherent human qualities.”

“Human nature” is, of course, an ambiguous and much-abused term. Although Fromm is well aware how the term has been invoked to justify any favored political, economic, or social policies, he nevertheless finds it useful. It becomes a dynamic concept that internalizes certain elements of social structure, and also (as Marx insisted) a counter-force lending its own impetus to social evolution. In “social character” theory, this human dynamism-in-social-context replaces “mechanistic Freudian biologism,” vague metaphysics, and rigid “pseudo-Marxian” socioeconomic determinism.

Freud was correct, says Fromm, to stress the paramount role of the family as the “psychological agent of society,” but Freud was wrong when he assumed that instinctive (and primarily sexual) drives are both the root of cultural phenomena and the core of permanent hostility to cultural “suppressions.” And Max Weber was also wrong, Fromm says, in postulating an “idealistic” theory of social effects. Emphasizing the power of ideas on individuals and societies is well and good, but he feels that Weber, like Marx, lacks a psychological dynamic. The power of ideas is effective, Fromm says, only when the ideas “are answers to specific human needs prominent in a given social character.”

Fromm argues that social character theory makes it possible to see how the social process actually works. As the individual’s needs and drives merge with a social consensus through the internalization of group values, he is led “to act according to what is necessary for him from a practical standpoint and also to give him satisfaction from activity psychologically.” From the society’s perspective, “the social character internalizes



The Dialectics of Society and Man

37

external necessities and thus harnesses human energy for the task of a given economic and social system.” (Passages like these exemplify what one critic has called Fromm’s “dazzling” ability to “mirror” one set of perspectives inside another. It was the kind of analysis Fromm was to perform in later books with many different sets of perspectives.)

A logical inference can be drawn from the social character theory. If and when a society’s needs and purposes mesh perfectly with the psychological-physiological needs “inherent” in man, a reasonable facsimile of utopia would have arrived. The tragedy of man’s history, Fromm confesses, is that agreement on societal purposes has not been achieved. And he admits that much remains obscure: “We are not yet able to state clearly in psychological terms what the exact nature of this human dynamism is.” In *Man for Himself*, six years later, he was to attempt a more exact formulation. For now, he was certain only that “relatedness” was the key problem of psychology. Alfred Adler would have agreed completely.

The psychoanalytic root of the entire process was the Freudian concept of the “superego,” the third unit in Freud’s tripartite scheme of the mind. The id made its unreasonable demands, the ego made contact with the outside world, and the superego (which was fundamentally the parental distillation of the world’s attitudes) acted as censor and censurer. In the process of “socializing” Freud during the 1930’s and 1940’s, several psychoanalysts had expanded the nature and function of the superego concept—sometimes, as Fromm did, abandoning the term itself.

Most closely related to Fromm’s “social character” adaptation was the “basic personality” theory of Abram Kardiner, which he outlined most definitively in *The Individual and His Society* (1946). Despite some differences in terminology, Kardiner’s theory matches Fromm’s in many respects; and Kardiner gives credit to Fromm for pioneering research in this area. But Kardiner has always hewed a line closer to the original ideas of Freud, although he became a serious student of the same cultural anthropology that helped influence Horney and Fromm. The gulf between Kardiner and Fromm has widened perceptibly over the years as Fromm gradually expanded his interpretation of human “needs” and the “self.”

The introduction of fundamental human “needs,” inciden-



tally, represented a major change from Fromm's earlier exposition of social and psychological dynamics; for no such idea is explicit in his work of the early 1930's. The most obvious explanation for the change, and the one offered most often by sympathetic as well as hostile critics, is that Fromm reacted to public events. Martin Birnbach writes, for example, that Fromm was even more a cultural relativist in the 1930's than Kardiner. But cultural relativism seemed morally inadequate in the face of the newly barbaric cultures of the Axis powers. "This writer would guess," says Birnbach, "that a comparatively objective methodology left Fromm no ground on which to base an unfavorable judgment of the social character that proved so receptive to totalitarianism in Nazi Germany."¹³

Birnbach's guess is a sensible one, and it unquestionably contains part of the truth. The advent of Nazism, Fromm has said many times, greatly affected his thinking on important questions. But Fromm has mentioned other considerations as well which relate to his own background and to his clinical experience. Before examining those factors, which Fromm was to explain a few years hence, it is worth turning to his analysis of the advent of totalitarianism—an analysis that culminates in *Escape from Freedom*.

IV *The Authoritarian Threat*

By Fromm's own reckoning, his interest in political behavior extends back to World War I, when he felt horrified at the upsurge of irrational belief and action. By the end of the 1920's, it was apparent that German unrest was deep and portentous: the republic was shaky, and swastika armbands were multiplying. Under the general auspices of the International Institute for Social Research, Fromm, with psychoanalyst Ernest Schachtel and others, initiated a study in 1929 that tried to assess what was happening. This study, "Character of German Workers and Employees in 1929/30," had clear political implications. "We wanted," Fromm recalls, "to ascertain what the chances were for Hitler's being defeated by the majority of the population." Presumably, most Germans were inclined more toward democracy than Nazism, but how deeply were these opinions rooted? Would Germans go so far, for example, as to fight for democratic beliefs, or would they yield to authoritarianism under pressure—suggesting that their *deeper* values lay elsewhere?¹⁴



The Dialectics of Society and Man

39

Open-ended questionnaires were designed to elicit “unintended, unconscious” responses. A sample question was “Which men in history do you admire most?” If a worker answered Alexander, Caesar, or Napoleon, the answer was interpreted as indicating “authoritarian” bias. If he responded Socrates, Pasteur, or Kant, he was classified as “democratic.” If Marx or Lenin appeared in the responses, classification depended on the company they kept. After these detailed questionnaires were administered in Frankfurt to about six hundred persons, the investigators concluded that about 10 percent of the workers and employees surveyed had an “authoritarian character structure”; about 15 percent had a “democratic character structure”; the remaining considerable majority lay somewhere in between. The results seemed to indicate that no great sympathy for Nazism would be found among the German working class, but also that the degree of absolute hostility was not very profound.

This investigation was certainly one of the earliest into the psychology of Nazism, among the later researchers were Harold Lasswell, the psychoanalytically trained political scientist, whose examinations of middle-class appeals were first published in 1933, and Siegfried Kracauer, whose imaginative book, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological Study of the German Film*, appeared in 1947. The Frankfurt study was also theoretically important as a pioneering effort toward the concept of the “authoritarian character,” one to be more fully developed in *The Authoritarian Personality* by T. W. Adorno and others.

In America in the 1930's, Fromm, like many of his colleagues in psychoanalysis, social psychology, and anthropology, was highly critical of many quasi-democratic institutions. Bureaucracy, regardless of its ideological rationale, was hardly an ideal structure for breeding independent thought and action. Competitive society, as Karen Horney argued in 1937, wreaked havoc on the psyches of winners and losers alike.

In this climate of anxiety, in 1939, with the Nazi explosion into war imminent, Fromm attacked Otto Rank's “will therapy.” Rank's premise, said Fromm, was the supremacy of belief: “What I will is true . . . what I want to believe.” In the therapeutic situation, the analyst (“the superior man”) becomes the voice of reality, an “assistant ego,” to direct the submissive patient. Fromm felt that this psychiatric approach had a political counterpart—the authoritarian line that extended from Nietzschean



arrogance to Hitler's opportunistic relativism, manipulation of language and ideas for purposes of power, and a conviction that injustice and suffering are inherent in human existence.

More disturbing than Rank's theory itself was its growing popularity among various groups, especially social workers. If Fascist philosophy shed its overt political symbols, Fromm speculated, its "quick, easy solutions" offered an irresistible appeal to many troubled people. For social workers struggling with virtually insoluble economic problems, says Fromm, the Rank theory that one can convert illusions into Absolute Truth is a glittering panacea. (In this connection, one might note the spate of sociological analyses during the 1940's and 1950's which argued, on almost identical grounds, that Superman comics and Mickey Spillane novels derived much of their appeal from their advocacy of swift, "no-nonsense" vengeance.)

By 1941, when Fromm published *Escape from Freedom*, the Western European democracies were at war with Germany and Italy. Certainly, Nazism was the most brutal ideology loose in the world. But for years Fromm had been stressing not only the Nazi threat but also the susceptibility to authoritarian ideas of people living under "democratic" capitalism. One of the most noteworthy features of *Escape from Freedom* was that Fromm, militantly anti-Nazi, also confronted directly the problem of why people gravitated toward authoritarianism in *any* modern setting.

The basic questions were about human "freedom": How had the meanings of that ambiguous word shifted as the Western world moved from closed feudal order to the relatively open-class society of mid-twentieth century? How could one account for human tendencies to seek, or retreat from, individual freedom? Among other things, Fromm was attempting in this multi-sided book a psychoanalytic interpretation of history. In this respect, *Escape from Freedom* was in part a sequel to *The Dogma of Christ* and in part a precursor to the analysis of "cold war" ideologies and anxieties that he was to present years later in *May Man Prevail*.²¹⁵

Freud had also subjected history to the psychoanalytic eye. But, Fromm argues, by clinging to the conception of virtually fixed instincts that are either satisfied or frustrated, Freud failed to comprehend the psychic significance of historical change. For Fromm, there are "certain definite changes of man's character



The Dialectics of Society and Man

41

[that] take place from one historical epoch to another": the "spirit" of the Middle Ages, of the Renaissance, and of the stages of capitalism are all quite different. The "spirit" of an age leads Fromm to character structure and to the explication of "social character" as a mechanism for understanding the relation between individual growth and historical evolution. Freedom, he says, can best be understood as a series of biological, social, and historical dialectical processes.

Human individuation, in Fromm's theory, begins with the severing of the umbilical cord. Then other primary ties are cut: from the mother as total provider, from nature, from the clan, the caste, the church. Each new grasp of biological and social autonomy brings a growth in self-strength but simultaneously a new kind of aloneness, and of fear. So liberation and frustration are the joint consequences of each bold step into a brave, but dangerous, new world. As the individual's power of reason and sense of independence grow, so too do the possibilities of insecurity and of what Fromm on an earlier occasion had described as a "feeling of powerlessness." The history of man, too, is seen as a process of evolutionary individuation, following an equally dialectical course. The gradual freedom from restrictive social ties, coupled with the "lack of possibilities for the positive realization of freedom and individuality," have created the dilemma of modern man.

Fromm's historical outline to some degree parallels the pattern of *The Dogma of Christ*, but it is wider in range and includes the new factor of "basic human needs." He begins with the Renaissance and Jakob Burckhardt. With minor reservations, he follows that scholar's interpretation of the distinctions between Medieval and Renaissance "spirit," and of the dynamics involved. Medieval man had limited mobility and choice, but he maintained some "concrete" individualism in that he possessed ways to express himself in his work and in his emotional life. As social stratification eroded, he began to develop greater "self-awareness as an individual."

Incipient capitalism, in its turn, generated class mobility, individual self-reliance, and new roles for capital, the market, and competitive energies. The additional erosion of clear-cut socioeconomic structures, however, meant that greater independence was coupled with new insecurities. With Max Weber, R. H. Tawney, and Werner Sombart now among his chief



sources, Fromm examines the way in which Protestantism prepared man to play a role in the new capitalistic system. The catalysts of that preparation were the two great Protestant reformers, Martin Luther and John Calvin. Both, says Fromm, were authoritarian personalities and thoroughly unpleasant people. Luther has always been a favorite subject for psychoanalytic interpreters: in recent years, Erik Erikson (*Young Man Luther*) and Norman O. Brown (Chapter XIV, "The Protestant Era," in *Love Against Death*) have both tried to assess the "inner meaning" of Protestantism through Luther's personality. Fromm's Luther preached love for God, but he really appealed (through the "unconscious") for submission to a higher power. Simultaneously, Luther urged freedom from unconscionable church authorities—even while he thundered that man was essentially powerless. The result, says Fromm, was a psychologically disabling merger of love and surrender.

In an article in 1939, "Selfishness and Self-Love," Fromm had already accused Calvin of urging an ethic that stressed humility to the point where it reached unbearable self-contempt. Now, "social character" theory extends that ethic's implications. The Calvinist turned of necessity to compulsive activity, and effort became an aim in itself. This aim, Fromm argues, was "the most important psychological change which has happened to man since the end of the Middle Ages. . . . men came to be driven to work not so much by external pressure but by an internal compulsion." Here then is Max Weber's Protestant Ethic, supplied with a psychological base to help explain the formation of a new social character. For external restraint, protestantized man substituted a "slavedriver conscience," reformulated three hundred-odd years later as the Freudian superego.

Under the capitalistic ethos, says Fromm, man did gain new economic and political freedoms, steps toward a positive self. But the freedom from authority that was implicit in widening democracy led to another surrender. Economic productivity and the market psychology created a vast economic machine, dedicated to the worship of goods as ends in themselves, and controlled by monopolistic factions. Both middle-class and lower-class man became "cogs" in the machine. The private conscience was swallowed up in the new "social" self, as mass advertising, mass propaganda, and irrational political appeals blurred issues,



The Dialectics of Society and Man

43

as well as distinctions between what was significant and what was trivial.

Modern alienated man, says Fromm with an aside to Marx, “does not only sell commodities, he sells himself.” His autonomy has all but vanished, his capacity for critical thinking has become dulled, and he feels fearful and insignificant. No wonder Mickey Mouse is a cultural hero: he is the little fellow in an uneven contest with great powers which are always threatening to engulf him. “Whistling in the dark” won’t help; either man moves from “negative” to “positive” freedom, Fromm warns, or he is in severe jeopardy, because of his inability to cope with the psychic burden, of surrendering his freedoms altogether.¹⁶

In *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time*, Karen Horney had described four methods by which the beleaguered neurotic might escape from oppressive anxieties and achieve a limited, “secondary,” satisfaction. Fromm offers four similar categories, bluntly calling them “mechanisms of escape.” All are understandable because no man is immune to their temptations and tendencies—but all have dangerous psychic and social implications. Two of these “mechanisms of escape” are the interlocking faces of authoritarianism, representing attempts to create new “secondary bonds.” One is masochistic dependence (parallel to Horney’s “neurotic need for affection”); the other is sadistic exploitation (parallel to Horney’s “neurotic striving for power”). Then there is “destructiveness,” where the goal is not symbiotic union but elimination of all “threats.” (Horney had a category of “neurotic withdrawal,” which is at least partly related.) Finally, there is “automaton conformity” (similar to Horney’s “neurotic submissiveness”), which Fromm describes as “pseudo-spontaneity”: what are presumably one’s own opinions are unconsciously derived from other, powerful influences. It is nothing less than the total loss of the self. Some of these “escape mechanisms,” or variations on them, emerge later, in *Man For Himself*, as full-fledged “character types.”

The final portions of *Escape from Freedom* are devoted to a psychological analysis of Nazism and of the alternatives currently facing Western democracies. On Nazism, Fromm builds on his unpublished Frankfurt study and on Harold Lasswell’s study of the German middle class. Negativism and resignation, Fromm concludes, characterized German working-class attitudes in the 1930’s. But the lower-middle class, faced by the un-



forgettable memory of crushing military defeat, the loss of monarchic stability, and the economic decline after World War I, greeted Nazism with enthusiasm.

Fromm points to Hitler and Goebbels as perfect demonstrations of the “authoritarian character,” who, like Luther and Calvin, inculcated a “systematized ideology” into the readily victimized masses. While preaching self-sacrifice, the Nazis reveled in power over their “contemptible” flock. And the symbiotic nature of their characters, Fromm says, was clear: they behaved sadistically toward inferiors, and they submitted masochistically to the “higher powers.” In the next few years, Fromm wrote a few more short pieces on Nazism, but he added nothing essential to his analysis.¹⁷

As for Western democracy, Fromm feels Americans need “thoughts of our own” in a culture that, through myriad social pressures and a basically “anonymous authority,” stresses conformity at any cost. The freest men, he says, are those for whom no artificial barriers exist between “self” and “activity.” The democratic goal must be “growth and expansion” of the individual, concurrently established as the goal for society itself. This necessitates a planned economy, he is sure, with a balance between centralized and decentralized authority. Fromm only sketches these notions here, pointing toward future books for elaboration. In a review of *Escape from Freedom*, anthropologist Ashley Montagu remarked presciently that it would always contain “the essence of the author’s considered conclusions.”

In one stroke, the book established Fromm’s reputation as one of the most provocative thinkers of his time, and it has gone through twenty-six reprintings in thirty years. Many reviewers greeted it enthusiastically, Dwight MacDonald, for example, calling it a “book of the greatest importance.” It was heralded by others as a “must” work for clinical psychologists, and as a sign that social psychology finally was “coming of age.” Sullivan’s journal, *Psychiatry*, devoted eight separate reviews and twenty-five pages to *Escape from Freedom*. Sullivanite Patrick Mullahy thought that Fromm had underrated the impact of science in the modern world, but his over-all estimate was highly favorable. He was most impressed by Fromm’s philosophical and moral contributions to “the cause of freedom.”

Unsurprisingly, some scholars reviewing the book took issue



The Dialectics of Society and Man

45

with Fromm on matters basic to their own perspectives. Psychoanalyst Karl Menninger took a classically Freudian position by finding Fromm “wholly within his rights in applying psychoanalytic theory to sociological problems,” but demurred at the use of social science to modify orthodox psychoanalysis. Fromm, charged Menninger, was a mere “lay analyst” who was “presumptuous” to criticize Freud so sharply. And he raised a charge that was to be echoed many times in ensuing years: Fromm rarely quoted or cited psychoanalysts, and he had failed to furnish “empirical and experimental” evidence.¹⁸

One reviewer asserted that he had “a violent quarrel” with Fromm because religion ought to be “placed more centrally in any analysis of ultimate concerns.” At an opposite pole, a reviewer who was unconcerned about the absence of “higher powers” in Fromm’s analysis felt instead that he had “undervalued biology.” In later years, Fromm would pay great attention to religion—so much so, in fact, that some of his chief admirers would include prominent theologians. Fromm has never, however, really dealt with the point about “undervaluing” biology. In one passage, he remarks that genetics is a “given,” and that psychoanalysis is concerned only with life experience. Obviously, psychosomatic theorists like Franz Alexander would disagree strongly.

Some critics also charged that Fromm oversimplified history; that his approach to the Reformation was lopsided; and that, in characterizing Luther almost exclusively as a “hater,” he had created a crude stereotype. Fromm had admitted in *Escape from Freedom* that his historical interpretation was far from complete, and not totally balanced. (“Objectivity,” he once remarked, “does not mean ‘detachment.’”) But he insisted that he was not trying to capture the “full” Luther, nor all of the mechanisms at work in so multiform a phenomenon as the Protestant Reformation. One had to make a choice, he explained: either one could be selective, emphasizing what seemed most crucial, and thus wrestle some basic meaning out of events, or one simply could yield up history to a mass of meaningless data.

Anthropologist Ruth Benedict may have put her finger on the key qualities of the book; while expressing some reservations about Fromm’s incursions into her particular specialty, she praised *Escape from Freedom* for the great range of territory it did encompass. His fusion, she said, of social change,



educational process, and personal therapy was substantially accurate and extremely important. And equally significant, she continued, was the fact that Fromm had struck precisely the right note in conveying the spirit of his age: “Modern man’s feeling of loneliness and insignificance has never been put more frankly in its social context. . . . Any society which promotes freedom must reckon also with the psychological havoc it is furthering.”¹⁹



CHAPTER 3

The Nature of Man

I “Self” and the Roots of Morality

NO SINGLE idea in all of Fromm’s work has been more elusive and controversial than his conception of the “self.” And, since his pivotal book *Escape from Freedom*, none has been more fundamental to his total theory. The “self” becomes the cornerstone of “social character.” It becomes Fromm’s bridge for connecting science and moral philosophy. It is also the core around which he builds a cautious optimism about human possibilities. Logically, the critics who are unconvinced about Fromm’s conception of the self believe, as a consequence, that his whole theoretical structure collapses.

The central line in most twentieth-century cultural anthropology, in behavioristic psychology, and in American social science generally has been deterministic, specifically environmentalist. So much so that the very term “self” has come to seem archaic, a throwback to the discredited metaphysics of an unenlightened age. Since David Hume, insists one political philosopher, the self as a substance has been “exposed . . . as the bastard of confused language and fevered imagination,” and has never been restored to “philosophical respectability.”¹ Unfortunately for those who enjoy keeping neat balance books of the history of ideas and who periodically close out dead accounts, supposedly moribund ideas keep popping up again. In the hands of the so-called Neo-Freudians, as Floyd Matson remarks in *The Broken Image*, the “old-fashioned idea of the self . . . has made a remarkable comeback.”

In his early writings Fromm leaned heavily toward historical determinism. In 1939, in “Selfishness and Self-Love,” his language was still that of traditional individualism, as he spoke merely of “respect for one’s own integrity and uniqueness” and



“understanding of one’s own self.” By 1941, in *Escape from Freedom*, Fromm’s ambivalence was evident. At one point he spoke of “the social process which creates man”; at another he deemed man “essentially” conditioned by history; at still another, he asserted that “life has an inner dynamism of its own.” But social character theory clearly incorporated “basic human needs” as an intrinsic element.

Fromm was injecting, if somewhat tentatively in 1941, the idea of a normative human nature. The uses of such a norm were obvious: it would offer a lever to challenge both the eclectic implications of cultural relativism and the apparent amorality of mechanistic psychology. But equally obvious were the hard questions he had to answer: What was the nature of this “inner dynamic”? What, precisely, were the inherent “needs”? Where and how did they originate? Was intrinsic human nature morally neutral or ethically directed? And, in the face of Positivistic skepticism, what kind of evidence could Fromm furnish that a self, whether “essence” or “dynamism,” really existed?

Six years later, Fromm sought to deal systematically with these questions. In 1947, he announced that *Man for Himself* represented a continuation of the theoretical investigation he had begun in *Escape from Freedom*. The threat of Nazism over, he was now trying to formulate an “objective” basis for ethics; to weld this link between dynamic psychology and moral philosophy, he had to define more rigorously just what he meant by man’s basic needs and drives. The title *Man for Himself* likely derived from the Talmudic saying, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” that Fromm had affixed to *Escape for Freedom*. It also, perhaps by coincidence, was a direct rebuttal of Karl Menninger’s *Man Against Himself* (1938), which closed with a “reiteration and reaffirmation of the hypothesis of Freud that man is a creature dominated by an instinct in the direction of death.”

Of all Freud’s myriad speculations about man, his theory of the “death instinct” was one of the least acceptable to psychoanalytic revisionists (Abram Kardiner has called it “silly”). This theory, that man’s ultimate drive is toward regression to a pre-vital state, Freud advanced cautiously in his disillusionment after World War I; by *The Ego and the Id* in the 1930’s, he stated this belief forcibly. Fromm also reacted bitterly to the ubiquitous demonstrations of human brutality, but he could



The Nature of Man

49

never accept the premise that destructiveness was man's primary motivation. Indeed, Fromm argues in *Man for Himself* that man's primary drive is toward the affirmation of life. "All organisms," he says, "have an inherent tendency to preserve their existence." To this statement he attaches a corollary: "existence and the unfolding of the specific powers of an organism are one and the same." Where Menninger's book discussed suicide for sixty pages (he cited it as the extreme form of man's basic drive toward self-destruction), Fromm dismisses suicide in a brief footnote as "pathological" and irrelevant to his principal thesis. Menninger drew no moral inferences from the phenomenon of suicide; he sought to be purely descriptive and dispassionate. But, for Fromm, the drive to live and to unfold one's powers opens the door to a "scientific" study of ethics. For man, he says, "Virtue is responsibility toward his own existence. Evil constitutes the crippling of man's powers."

Consistent with his evolutionary orientation, Fromm cites a line of philosophical development for the premise that "something . . . is reacting to environmental influences in ascertainable ways that follow from its properties." Aristotle pioneered in the concept, he says; Spinoza (on an intuitive level) adduced dynamic psychology; John Dewey introduced empirical inquiry; Freud discovered the psychoanalytic method.

Fromm postulates two kinds of dichotomies in human life, "existential" and "historical." In combination, they create man's limitations and his possibilities; they inspire his aspirations, but they also generate his frustrations. "Existential dichotomies" (not, he points out, "existentialist" in Jean-Paul Sartre's sense of the term) refer to the fundamental conditions of life—and death. Man is "part of nature, subject to her physical laws and unable to change them, yet he transcends the rest of nature. He is [by virtue of self-awareness, reason and imagination] set apart while being a part; he is homeless, yet chained to the home he shares with all creatures. Cast into this world at an accidental place and time, he is forced out of it, again accidentally. Being aware of himself, he realizes his powerlessness and the limitations of his existence."²

Thus, reason is noble, but it can lead to discontent. Man's unique ability to create symbolic abstractions about himself and his destiny (as philosophers Ernst Cassirer and Suzanne Langer also have argued but with differing emphases) marks off his



distinctions from the rest of nature. Of all nature's creatures, says Fromm, man alone knows he must die; and he also knows that, "while every human being is the bearer of all human potentialities, the short span of his life does not permit their full realization even under the most favorable circumstances." Furthermore, while man is always alone, unique, he cannot be happy unless he feels related to others—those who are alive, those who preceded him, and others who will one day succeed him. Man is indeed an anomaly, "the freak of the universe."

Otto Rank's birth trauma theory, which Fromm had begun to transform in his first article, "The Sabbath," had asserted that man seeks a restoration of his embryonic equilibrium. Fromm argues, in *Man for Himself*, that man's reason enables him to know there is no return to yesterday's natural harmony; there is only tomorrow, where, through the exercise of that same reason, man might become "the master of nature, and of himself." For the first time, Fromm now hints at themes that become more powerful in his later work: the limitations of reason, and the belief that the path of evolution leads to the possibility of "transcendence."

Fromm sees existential dichotomies (there are others aside from the basic life-death dichotomy) as, by definition, insuperable. But the contradictions he calls "historical dichotomies" are not. Cultural lags, technological gaps, and all the other discrepancies between what man might achieve and what he does achieve are potentially remediable. Within the limits imposed by his culture, man can do much. Like John Locke and the *philosophes* of the eighteenth century, Fromm exhorts man to devote his energies toward understanding and improving the real world. "There is no meaning to life," says Fromm, "except the meaning man gives his life by the unfolding of his powers, by living productively."³

Passages like this one, which seem to partake almost equally of rationalism, naturalism, and mysticism, have led Edgar Friedenberg in "Neo-Freudianism and Erich Fromm," to comment that the texture of Fromm's thought is perhaps closer to that of Martin Buber than to that of Freud. A few parallels between Fromm and Buber have already been noted; the matter might be pursued a little farther. Like Fromm, Buber, a much older man, came from a rabbinical family and read widely in Jewish mysticism. He too studied the Meister Eckhart of whom Fromm always



The Nature of Man

51

had been so fond; and, although the mystical tendencies of Buber's mind went deeper than Fromm's, his variety of mysticism has also been characterized as "mild" and certainly as nonascetic in orientation.

For Buber, the pursuit of man's "wholeness" was also a fundamental aim; he spoke continually of the necessity of establishing "genuine" (Fromm's word is "authentic") relations with other people and with the surrounding environment. Buber's concept of self had a theological base while Fromm's has not, but Buber's "self" was also not a concrete essence. Rather, it was a fusion of man's deepest nature with all other aspects of life—especially one's fellow man. Both men also developed interests in Zen Buddhism and communitarian Socialism. Since 1941, Fromm has maintained that "relatedness is the key problem of psychology" and that it is bound up with yearnings and frustrations. Buber could write in 1913 in *I and Thou*, "The development of the soul in the child is inextricably bound up with that of the longing for the *Thou*, with the satisfaction and the disappointment of his longing, with the game of his experiments and the tragic seriousness of his perplexity." There is no direct reference by Fromm to Buber in *Escape from Freedom* or in *Man for Himself* (although there are some brief ones in later books). But a most interesting coincidence in terminology occurs in *Escape from Freedom* when Fromm speaks of family hostilities as "sharpening the distinction between the 'I' and the 'thou.'"

Buber would seem to have had one great advantage, epistemologically speaking. Like Paul Tillich but unlike Fromm, he professed a God; and he therefore had a theological "ground" on which to establish his theories of "inner man." One either shared Buber's theistic assumptions or one rejected them. Fromm, despite later additions to his own theory, remains that curious paradox, as he says, an "atheistic mystic." Religious thinkers have often admired Fromm's theory of man, even while they have insisted that a missing link—God—ought to be inserted. Walker Percy, for example, simply cannot make sense out of Fromm's position half inside and half outside of religion. Fromm, he says in *America*, is surely in good company when he centers on the theme of "transcendence." This concept, says Percy, is agreed upon as an "inveterate trait" of man by thinkers as different as Gabriel Marcel and Jean-Paul Sartre: man must



indeed “surpass himself.” But Percy believes that Fromm uses “transcendence” to mean little more than “creativity,” and he finds that a “curious” and overly secular usage.⁴

Positivists have been much more caustic in their criticism, and two examples should indicate something of the nature and range of such critiques. John Schaar, to begin with, is a political philosopher who describes Fromm as a naturalist “in disguise.” The disguise, he says, is Fromm’s cloak of humanism, but the hidden naturalism is revealed when it turns out that man doesn’t create ethical postulates; rather, he “discovers” them in his own nature. Schaar charges Fromm with committing the “naturalistic fallacy” because he doesn’t realize that “society is not a mere extension of nature but an independent realm of being which follows its own laws.” Furthermore, Fromm’s naturalism is seen as a futile effort to define the “good.” To do this, argues Schaar, requires that one have a complete knowledge of nature—which Fromm obviously doesn’t have. Fromm’s final naturalistic sin, says Schaar, is that he admits the existence of “evil.” Since Fromm’s total frame of reference is “nature,” evil must come from nature. But, since naturalism holds that what is natural is good, Fromm is caught in a hopeless self-contradiction.⁵

Whether the contradiction is created by Fromm or is largely the result of the categories that Schaar insists on squeezing him into is an open question. Schaar’s arguments are valid given his premises; but “valid” means internally consistent and does not necessarily reflect either the “truth” of Fromm’s ideas or even the meaning of Fromm’s ideas. Thus, Thomas Aquinas’s four “proofs” of God, or Hume’s “disproof” of Berkeley’s “disproof” of Locke’s “disproof” of Medieval logic, or Schaar’s “disproof” of Fromm’s naturalism, are quite capable of being turned inside out when prior assumptions are challenged. In this instance, the straw man may be Fromm’s “naturalism.” There *are* naturalistic beliefs in Fromm, but they constitute only elements, not the totality, of his thought. On no occasion does Fromm argue that everything which is “natural” is “good”—that is an attribute of Schaar’s definition.

Schaar also quarrels with Fromm’s belief that “the drive to live is inherent in every organism” and with Fromm’s purportedly self-evident statement that “existence and the unfolding of the specific powers of an organism are one and the same.” Here,



The Nature of Man

53

indeed, Fromm is on tenuous ground; these are sweeping generalizations, persuasive more as ideals than as “facts.” But Fromm does offer qualifications: he grants that “certain conditions” must be present for growth; and, increasingly over the years, he has admitted that a strong destructive drive (he called it a “secondary potential” in 1964) coexists with a life-affirming drive.

Does Fromm have an empirical basis for his argument that an “inherent” drive for life exists? He insists that he does, and that what led him to abandon orthodox Freudian theory and start shaping his own theory was his own clinical experience. He does not cite details, an omission which surely has contributed to the skepticism of many critics. But it is interesting that in recent years a growing number of psychoanalysts have indicated that they share Fromm’s “drive-for-life” thesis and that they claim to do so primarily on the basis of a wide range of empirical evidence.⁶

A different critique of Fromm’s “existential dichotomies” is offered by Pavlovian Harry Wells. Wells, who speaks as a pure materialist, sees the human being as an “interaction of phylogenetic anatomy and physiology with the ontogenetic participation of man in the surrounding natural and social world.” Unlike Schaar, Wells grasps clearly Fromm’s dialectical approach; but he reaches different conclusions. Fromm, he says, tried unsuccessfully to “reform” psychoanalysis in the 1930’s by injecting a social dimension. When, because of Fromm’s monolithic condemnation of existing societies, social additives proved inadequate to explain how rational, productive human beings can come about, he turned to “humanism”—to “essential” qualities and innate needs. But, argues Wells, Fromm’s “existential dichotomies” are illusions spun in the air. Lacking any empirical base, they cannot be taken seriously. For Wells, the materialist, Fromm’s “existential dichotomies” are really only misunderstood “historical dichotomies.” Thus, reclassification solves the problem—by eliminating it.⁷

Again, Wells’s sophisticated argument, like that of Schaar, rests on *his* assumptions: in this instance, that a certain kind of demonstrable reality is the total reality. The point need not be labored, for a psychiatrist who possesses a nicely ironic perspective on disputes inside academic psychology has stated it succinctly: “All schools of psychology . . . inevitably begin with



a belief about man's essential nature which forms the implicit frame of reference into which their facts and the results of their observations are fitted rather than the reverse, as they would have us believe."⁸

II *Character Types*

Karl Menninger once criticized Fromm for his practice of giving Freud credit with one hand but then taking it away with the other. This often does seem to be Fromm's practice. In *Man for Himself*, his attempt to formulate a "scientific" theory of ethics based on human needs and norms, Fromm continually returns to Freudian concepts, and consistently "revises" them. The ultimate locus of personality and ethics, says Fromm, is "character"—not abstracted vices and virtues. Freud had reached the same conclusion and had begun the same study as early as 1908. Fromm now builds on Freud's character dynamics and on Freud's conception of character "types." What Fromm adds are social and cultural factors; the resulting characterology, even by the rigorous standards of many hostile critics, is impressive.

"Personality" itself Fromm defines as the totality of all one's individual psychic qualities. One component is temperament, which he defines Hippocratically as one's "mode of reaction." Temperament, which he regards as constitutional and fixed, determines whether one reacts quickly or slowly, strongly or weakly. According to Fromm, it has no ethical implications per se. (On this point, Schaar's demurrer seems well taken: Fromm may be disposing a little too quickly of a rather problematical matter. This instance is one of a number in which he slights the uses of physiological psychology—as the psychosomatic theorists do not.)

The other component of personality, character, is far more complicated. Character, says Fromm, is dynamic; it is acquired from experience; and it determines *what* a person reacts to. Thus, in this breakdown, Goering and Himmler were temperamentally different, a cyclothyme and schizothyme, respectively; but in character both were ambitious sadists—with the obvious ethical implications. Fromm gives Freud credit for the original concept that character is dynamic, "a system of strivings" which underlie, but are not identical with "behavior"; that character traits operate as powerful, often unconscious forces; and that



The Nature of Man

55

a total organization, and not individual traits, is the crux of what we mean by "character." He follows Freud, too, in stressing the importance of childhood experience. But, like all the cultural revisionists, he also gives considerable weight to the characterological significance of postchildhood experience.

Fromm's major point of theoretical deviation from Freud is his rejection of "mechanistic" libido theory. Freud had spoken of fixed qualities of libido (roughly, energy) that could be directed inward or outward. Alfred Adler and then Karen Horney had substituted the notion of tendencies (with no fixed biological limits) to move toward or away from people. Fromm's concurrence with this later line of thought is clear; he argues that "the fundamental basis of character . . . is in specific kinds of a person's relatedness to the world." The word "world" is very important because his concept of "relatedness" goes beyond the purely human interaction that Horney, and also Sullivan, tended to stress. Fromm, for example, postulates a new polarity: the vital against the non-vital. Relatedness, he says, takes two forms: toward things, which he calls the process of "assimilation," or toward people, which he calls "socialization."

Whether a man tends to love or hate, to compete or cooperate, to favor liberty or oppression, whether he tends to acquire things by taking them or by producing them himself, these patterns of "orientation" express his character. And, as for character itself, Fromm defines it as "the (relatively permanent) form in which human energy is canalized in the process of assimilation and socialization." The use of the term "energy" suggests that in some ways Fromm is still closer in his thinking to Freud than to either Adler or Horney or Sullivan. As for the polarization of "people" and "things," Fromm seems closer to Henri Bergson's vitalistic theories than to any of the traditional formulations of psychoanalytic theory.

Fromm had already, in *Escape from Freedom*, outlined his theoretical and historical analyses of how character is created in interaction with the social process. Now he describes basic character types, pointing out that these are "ideal-types," not examples of actual individuals. Every *real* person is in reality a composite. Here Fromm had a considerable psychoanalytic legacy to draw from, a sampling of which, for comparative purposes, might be indicated first.

Freud's character types were all derived from libido "fixations"



during early stages of childhood. Most systematically, he described the “anal” character, whose character traits—obsessive obstinacy, orderliness, and general tendencies to hostility and withdrawal—arose after difficulties with bowel training. Together with disciples Sandor Ferenczi and Karl Abraham, he described three other basically “nonproductive” character types. The “oral receptive,” sublimated at the sucking stage, who was cheerful and generous but naïvely and desperately in need of comfort and protection. The “phallic” character, who was overly aggressive; the “urethral,” excessively ambitious and outgoing. All four of these types were thus “characters” formed out of arrested psychophysiological development.

Freud’s one mature character type, the “genital,” was warm, loving, and independent; he could care about and demonstrate care for others. But, given Freud’s skeptical view of civilization as it worked its way into the dynamics of human growth, “genital” man was an unrealized—and probably unrealizable—ideal, and as a result Freud paid him only minimal attention. Otto Rank’s extension of healthy man, however, was elaborate. Rank divided character types into the normal, the neurotic, and the creative, each with a cluster of values centered around his “will theory.” The “normal” character adjusts, conforms, to the will of others. The “neurotic” is unable to adjust or to find a creative alternative. The “creative” man, an artist, or a man who lives “artistically,” expresses his own will and makes his own truth. As for Karen Horney’s characterology, it was a direct outgrowth of her “neurotic” forms of escape already discussed, just as Fromm’s was in part an extension of his own “escape mechanisms.”

Fromm’s characterology dispensed with libido theory; but, with one exception, his “types” clearly resemble Freud’s. As he later said, in Richard Evans’s *Dialogue with Erich Fromm*, “they are parallel [to Freud’s] in description of the syndrome. They are not parallel in terms of their generic explanations.” And although he had sharply attacked Rank’s philosophical tenets in his article on “will therapy,” one of his own types bears similarities to Rank’s idea of the “normal-adjusted character.” At this stage of his theorizing, Fromm delineated three “non-productive” characters: the “exploitative,” the “receptive,” and the “hoarding.” Exploitative man, as one might expect, wants to *take*. He is hostile, manipulative, suspicious, cynical; his traits



The Nature of Man

57

resemble those of Freud's "phallic" type. Receptive man is passive, often indiscriminately so; and his great need is to be loved. Like Freud's "oral" man, he is fundamentally, and insatiably, a dependent creature. (Freud himself, Fromm says in a later book, *Sigmund Freud's Mission*, was a variation of this character type.) Hoarding man, like Freud's "anal" character, concentrates his energies on *possessing*. Self-isolated, clinging to the past, he is obsessive in his needs for order, punctuality, and cleanliness. He is suspicious of all that is new.

With this characterological catalogue, Fromm is saying that his own observations essentially coincided with Freud's. But he believes that to *account* for the origins of these character types, one has to go beyond biology and into the complicated historical and social arena. What filters down to the child, largely through the family, is a distillation of the available values. For example, Fromm described in *Escape from Freedom* the "advanced stage" of capitalism which, he said, generated a new character type. Fromm calls it the "marketing" character, a product of the modern conditions of "abstract and impersonal demand." A world in which everything is for sale, and has to be "in fashion" and properly packaged, produces the marketing character. The weakening of the family unit means that parental surrogates now often set the pattern: the popular media of the press and the movies offer models, and the young person hastens to oblige and conform. The modern educational system, too, he ventures, is a prime culprit since it is built around acquisitive, supposedly "practical," values. Nowhere does it urge that time and energy be devoted to serious, reflective thought. For "marketing" man, real knowledge of "self" is not even a comprehensible idea. His human relationships inevitably are superficial. Knowledge itself is reduced to an instrument for worldly "success" in crude, manipulative terms.⁹

For a humanist critic, assault on the values of society is far easier to accomplish than is the creation of viable alternatives. Although Fromm did not share Freud's pessimism about *all* civilization, he took such a glum view of *modern* civilization that he found it difficult to locate a positive character, an image of the good man. In fact, several critics have suggested that Fromm's attack on current social values is so thoroughgoing that he ultimately draws a picture of man versus civilization that is as fully polarized as Freud's.¹⁰



But Fromm could not accept an outlook of futility, as such titles as *Man for Himself* and *The Sane Society* indicate. His approach in 1947 was to begin with Freud's shadowy "genital" man and to transform him. Genital man, Fromm suggests, can be visualized as being "productive" materially and socially as well as sexually. The productive orientation, explains Fromm, "refers to a fundamental attitude, a mode of relatedness in all realms of human experience." As Fromm once had used Freud's psychic dynamics to fill a "gap" in Marx's theory of man, so now he was using Marx's work-and-activity dynamics to fill a "gap" in Freud's theory of man. No wonder Fromm has presented difficulties to orthodox Freudians and Marxians alike.

In earlier writings, Fromm had tentatively referred to the value of "spontaneity." In *Man for Himself*, the caution disappears. Productive man, he says, "enlivens" and "re-creates," through self-generated "spontaneous" activity, his experience of the world. Productiveness extends to the creation of material things, art, systems of thought, and to discovering and building the self and genuine human relationships. To love "productively" means that one cares, that one respects, that one knows one is responsible. And despite the impact of the marketing society, Fromm insists, "Productiveness is an attitude which every human being is capable of, unless he is mentally and emotionally crippled."

For each character orientation, Fromm lists positive and negative traits which represent points on a continuum. Under "exploitative," for instance, there are traits ranging from "captivating" to "seducing," or from "proud" to "conceited." Was there a theoretical problem created by these scales of traits? At a symposium where Fromm was present, a Boston psychiatrist found himself confused by the fact that all the "unproductive" character types were composed of traits that ranged from positive to negative. This range seemed to indicate that an essentially *negative* character could have mostly *positive* traits. The "two kinds of classificatory criteria," he commented, needed clarification. But at least on the record, Fromm never directly replied.¹¹

Other theoretical problems have been raised by Fromm's characterology. Cause-and-effect relationships, for example, are not always clear. Patrick Mullahy, a psychoanalyst generally sympathetic to Fromm at this time, raised the question in this form: Fromm, he said, gave character a "primary causal func-



The Nature of Man

59

tion, and ideas, judgments, and actions are said to be an effect or result of character.” But wasn’t it the other way around? Mullahy suspected that ideas and judgment were as “efficacious in the constitution of character as anything else.”¹² For many contemporary social thinkers, of course, any neat cause-and-effect formulations are hazardous—hence the advent of the concept of “process” and the development of such multicausal approaches as gestaltism, Kurt Lewin’s “field theory,” or the intricate biosocial theories of man sketched by Harry Stack Sullivan, Franz Alexander, Gardner Murphy, and others. Fromm himself, with his dialectical interplay of existential and historical dichotomies and of “social character” process, demonstrates his own relatedness to these methodological currents. In a later book, *The Heart of Man*, he does outline the interaction between character, ideas, and actions, as being cumulative and reciprocal.

III *Questions of Culture and Morality*

Man for Himself was an extremely ambitious book, even as much so as *Escape for Freedom*. Fromm was trying to work out an original blend of psychic and environmental causality, to insert an element of “natural” volition into a generally deterministic framework, and to find an objective base for ethical theory. To reconcile these seemingly antithetical ideas and methods, he often turned to paradoxical statements (one reviewer of *Escape from Freedom* said he was continually irritated by Fromm’s “riddles and anomalies”) or to unconventional definitions. “Objectivity,” Fromm asserts at one point, “does not mean detachment, it means respect.” With this verbal—and psychological—lever, he can examine the implications of “scientific method” in a slightly unorthodox way. He does the same thing with ambiguous words like “faith,” “religion,” or “self.” Quite often, Fromm had sound etymological basis for his definitions: the problem, all too frequently, was that these words have come to have standard, if not exactly fixed, meanings for most readers, and they carry particular connotations.

An example is the word “neurosis,” and the way Fromm reassessed it, with implications that were to lead him toward the concepts of “sane” and “insane” societies. Freud did not invent the word (its modern usage stems from the eighteenth century), but he made it world-famous. For Freud, neurosis was the



inevitable result of man's conflict with society; and it clearly was synonymous with "psychoneurosis"—that is, as dictionaries still tend to define it, it has to do with *individual* disorders. Neurosis came about, Freud argued most explicitly in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, because instinctive drives are necessarily thwarted—repressed—by the demands of civilization. Hence, Freud could refer to the "pathology of civilized communities." All the cultural revisionists took sharp issue with this rigid polarity and, in varying ways, argued for a more open-ended and flexible view of human possibilities. A major theme of Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* was, in fact, the reshaping of personality in accordance with historical change. But, if "neurosis" were defined simply as the failure to adapt to the social situation, did this mean that the man who *did* adapt was healthy? Horney in particular (but unfairly) had been accused of counseling just such a survival technique. Otto Rank valued "creative" men above all others, but he did call conformists "normal" and "healthy."

Fromm suggested a *social* definition as early as *Escape from Freedom*: "From a standpoint of human values . . . a society could be called neurotic in the sense that its members are crippled in the growth of their personality." One should note that Fromm's concept is different from Freud's "collective neuroses"—by that expression, Freud implied a *universal* condition rooted in the nature of man and society. Fromm identified his own dual perspective unmistakably in 1944, in "Individual and Social Origins of Neurosis." The ideas he expressed here were carried over intact to *Man for Himself* three years later. What any society tried to do, he said, was to preserve its functioning by implanting its values in each new generation: people had to acquire the kind of character which made them *want* to act in the way they *had* to act. This element was, of course, an intrinsic one in his social character theory. But now he stressed the significance of "innate" human goals. In 1944 he phrased them suppositionally. If we accept the idea that "freedom" and "spontaneity" are human goals, he said, and if we then discover that most people do not achieve them, we must assume that their characters contain a "socially patterned defect." Again he referred to Spinoza for an early insight: "Greediness, ambition, and so forth are forms of insanity, although usually one does not think of them as 'illness.'"



The Nature of Man

61

Fromm felt that these characteristics, which once may have been considered rare aberrations, now had become very widespread. In his age, the individual with these characteristics does not feel that he is an outcast because he finds that the same characteristics are shared by a great many others. And, if the individual feels that he may have lost some of his own humanity, he can be comforted by the security of “fitting in” with people like himself.

So there are two categories of maladjusted people. When the individual feels maladjusted from the society, he is “neurotic.” When the “defective” patterning itself becomes prevalent, one can speak of a “pathology of normalcy.” Theoretically speaking, “adjustment therapy” would seem to make sense for a “neurotic,” but it makes no sense at all to speak of an “adjustment” to a fundamentally defective system. Fromm went beyond applying a medical term, “pathological” (or as he said in a later book, “sick”), to social structure and values. In a review of the book *Is Germany Incurable?*, he applied a directly moral judgment, warning against substituting psychoanalytic concepts for valid ethical concepts. To do so, he said, would “weaken the sense for moral values by calling something by a psychiatric term when it should be called plainly evil.” While there is no question about Freud’s essentially moral outlook, he was never so explicitly valuative as Fromm.¹³

In *Man for Himself*, Fromm supplies a name for his attempt to provide an objective foundation for a theory of morality. He calls it “humanistic ethics,” the “applied science of the ‘art of living’ based upon the theoretical ‘science of man.’” In presenting his theory, he raises some of the thorniest questions in philosophy: the nature of conscience, the meaning of pleasure, the innate morality (or immorality, or amorality) of man, and the sources of ethical propositions. Fromm always has been adept, as one writer has remarked, at asking the important questions.

To understand Fromm’s answers, it is necessary to briefly recapitulate his premises. Fromm’s key premises are that man exists in nature and in history, and that he is both created and self-creating through a complex series of dialectical processes. This human dynamism is neither passive nor blank; it is an active agent, whose best interests lie in the shaping of a true “self.” In one sense, this “self” is purely personal, individual.



But, in another sense, its very nature and destiny are linked with all other “selves.” There is, therefore, both a private and a public responsibility—linked in essence virtually by definition. Fromm’s all-encompassing “natural truth” of life is a nontheological equivalent of the “God” of theologians.

Like Freud, Fromm is almost habitually dualistic in his thinking. Starting from his premises, he argues that familiar concepts each embody a pair of attributes, one life-affirming (and therefore essentially positive and moral) and the other life-thwarting, or life-denying (and therefore essentially negative). On the question of “authority,” for instance, Fromm defines two antithetical types. “Rational authority” has its basis in the obvious fact that some people have more experience or wisdom than others and can teach or guide. Its source, he says, is in “competence,” its duration is temporary, and its basic condition is mutual respect. “Irrational authority,” on the other hand, has its source in power, and its duration has no fixed limits. If mutual respect occurs, it does so more by inadvertence than by intention. Because of Fromm’s heavy stress on the “I,” on the self, on the growth and significance of self-determination, and on the role of “freedom” as the ultimate value, critics have sometimes interpreted—or misinterpreted—him to mean that he opposes “authority” in any form. The clearest example is John Schaar’s book about Fromm; it is significantly titled *Escape from Authority*.

Fromm also bifurcates ethical systems into those which are “authoritarian” and those which are “humanistic.” In “authoritarian ethics,” values are imposed from the outside; and the interests of the authority, not of the subject, are determinative. Neither reason nor knowledge is the criterion. “Humanistic ethics” rest on the premise that only man himself can shape criteria for good and evil, “the sole criterion of ethical value being man’s welfare.” Now how, one properly asks, does man *know* what is right and what is wrong? For a religious believer, the source of conscience is clear, and the task of “knowing” is, or seems, easier. But Fromm agrees with the Freudian verdict, that what is customarily called the “conscience” is merely the internalized voice of external authority as implanted by parents or by other social or political parent-surrogates.

Then Fromm cites another conscience, one closer to Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” than to anything in Freud. This second, truer,



The Nature of Man

63

conscience is “humanistic,” it is “the voice of our loving care for ourselves.” Fromm avers that this true inner voice frequently is muted by the clatter of competing voices. Emerson would have had man look deeply, into the immanence of divinity, but Fromm calls for a search into the unconscious, into dreams. And he cites Franz Kafka’s *The Trial* as a literary demonstration of the interweaving of authoritarian and humanistic consciences.

In *The Trial*, Fromm says, a dreamlike, symbolic language is employed to recount outer, concrete events; but it “actually refers to inner experiences.” The corrupt, accusative authorities symbolize K.’s rebellious attitude toward authorities; he feels empty, sterile, obsessed with unknown guilts. At the moment of his execution, K. catches a glimpse of his own “unproductiveness,” his lack of love, his lack of faith. K. realizes, too late, his obligation to others and to himself.¹⁴ The sources, and perhaps the implications, of this “humanistic” conscience are still elusive in *Man for Himself*. In subsequent books, *The Art of Loving* and *The Forgotten Language*, Fromm resumes the theme and develops it in other contexts.

As for man’s “innate” morality, Fromm finds encouragement in the forward direction of history. Man is moving, he believes, toward an affirmation of his integrity and dignity, toward Pelagius over Augustine, toward Jefferson over Hobbes. Man is potentially, *primarily*, good, but the actualization of goodness requires specific “conditions.” Evil he classifies as a “secondary” potential, one that tends to emerge coincident with those conditions that thwart growth. Where Freud had argued that neurosis was created by the blocking of sexual energy, Fromm conceives neurosis as the result of man’s failure to use his “productive” powers.

Fromm leaves one of the most treacherous questions for last; that is, trying to clarify such terms as “absolute,” “relative,” and “objective” in relation to ethical propositions. Eternal truth, he says, is beyond man; he can only proceed on the basis of where science stands at the moment: “Scientific knowledge is... only the optimal truth attainable in a given historical period.” And certain problems, arising out of particular historical dichotomies, may not admit of any single “correct answer.” But, Fromm argues, there is an objective base to ethics, and that is where connection is made with existential questions. Here he draws a distinction between “universal” and “socially im-



manent” ethics. The latter arrive out of given social imperatives, such as the injunctions toward courage in a warrior society or toward patience in an agricultural one. These have a temporary “truth” value. But transcending “socially immanent” ethics (which he presumably sees as being mistakenly elevated to ultimates by the cultural relativists) are “universal” ethics: those moral norms whose aim is the “growth and unfolding of man.” The ethic “Love thy neighbor as thyself,” says Fromm, is objective for all men; the society which is in full harmony with man’s existential needs will recognize and instill it as a basic value.



CHAPTER 4

Rediscovering Buried Meanings

I *The Psychodynamics of Belief*

FROM THE late 1920's until the early 1940's, most of Fromm's comments on religion were psychosociological, and they tended to be negative. Church doctrines, he said, were largely promulgated by the ruling classes for their own purposes, or by those who unwittingly served the same purposes. The gratifications of believers served as compensations for thwarted needs. His militant atheism seemed, therefore, in a direct line from Marx and Freud. Hence, with the appearance of such books as *Psychoanalysis and Religion* and *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*, in which the hostile Marxian and Freudian estimates of religion were turned inside out, it is not surprising that materialistic critics charged him with having "retreated" from realism. Fromm's indictment of contemporary society, according to Harry K. Wells, left him no grounds for optimism; as a result, he sought solace in the tired old concept of the indwelling soul.

Wells's explanation is not adequate; Fromm did not simply switch from devout orthodoxy before 1927 to fervent antireligiousness, and then turn back again to the essential beliefs of his fathers in the late 1940's (pausing only to disguise his revived faith as "humanism"). His interest in religion actually has extended the full length of his career, from "The Sabbath" in 1927 to *You Shall be as Gods* in 1966. To be sure, the religious perspective changed, as Fromm admitted when *The Dogma of Christ* was translated and republished after thirty years. But there is far more continuity in his attitudes than may appear on the surface, and he has remained an atheist ever since 1927.

The real center of Fromm's "religiousness," which is a fusion of naturalistic and mystical beliefs, abetted by what he believes to be scientifically valid psychological findings, has also remained



intact. In his first article, "The Sabbath," he cited the prophetic concept that man and nature ultimately would be restored to harmony. The same theme recurs consistently in subsequent writings, and in *You Shall be as Gods*, he says that the Sabbath ritual was "a state of union between man and nature and between man and man." His tone is naturalistic and mystical, but it is never theological. Quite properly, the psychoanalytic and philosophical *Art of Loving* has been called the most "religious" of all his books.

Changes of attitude in Fromm's works have mostly been matters of degree, and reflections of particular preoccupations. Thus, his work on Zen Buddhism (which prompted some critics to suggest that Fromm had "given up" trying to deal directly with social and political issues) was immediately followed by *May Man Prevail?* which was a solidly documented study of Cold War psychology and of the political, economic, and military conditions which had helped produce it.

Specifically, what were Fromm's developing thoughts about religion in the years before and just after *Man for Himself*? Even in the 1930's, when "Neo-Freudian" environmentalism was at its peak, he was not implacably hostile. He met Paul Tillich in the early 1930's in America, and they jointly organized an informal seminar on the relationship between psychology, psychoanalysis, and theology. Late in 1941, under the auspices of the National Council of Religion in Higher Education, he addressed an audience that included theologians as well as social scientists. He argued that something akin to religious feeling was not only psychologically understandable but also psychologically imperative. The next year, the paper appeared in the liberal psychoanalytical journal *Psychiatry*, under the title "Faith as a Character Trait."

As he had done with the term "authority," and from the same premises, Fromm dichotomized "faith" into negative and positive forms. "Irrational faith," the kind traditionally synonymous with religious belief, he regarded as essentially blind, based on fear, ignorance, or a need to submit. As institutionalized by church groups it hardly differed from superstition—witness, he illustrates, the Exodus account where God instills "belief" in misbehaving Hebrews by having Moses pronounce the sacred name or by performing miracles. A secular counterpart was Nazism, the doctrines of which the German people swallowed



Rediscovering Buried Meanings

67

whole, largely on the basis of Hitler's "inspirational" ideas and personal charisma.

Against this irrationality Fromm poses "rational faith," a blend of "original thought" and "rational vision" (which is analogous to scientific method). One can have faith in anyone whom one knows deeply and well, or in ideas which are carefully considered and assessed. These examples of "rational faith" do not constitute hard proof of reality, but, Fromm insists, such faith is prerequisite to proof because it implies "recognition of potentialities and the vision of their unfolding." Fromm had not yet at this time worked out his character typologies, but he believed there was an intrinsic relationship between the two kinds of faith and particular character types. Obviously, "rational faith" would be a trait embedded in the "productive character"—the word was already on his mind when he noted that an essential feature of this character type would be "productiveness."

There should be no question about the psychological importance of the concept Fromm was working with. The cliché version of what Fromm calls "irrational faith" is "wishin' will make it so," but psychologists are hardly unaware that strong belief can generate action, which in turn can help to shape events.¹

Fromm was not unaware of the persistence of semantic problems: "Faith is not a popular concept in today's intellectual climate." Historically, this was understandable but unfortunate. The modern intellectual, says Fromm, having shaken off the shackles of ancient churches and ideologies, now is "rooted in despair" and has turned to pure and purely aimless relativism. This turn, says Fromm, is not rationality at all; rather, he suggests, it is an example of "irrational doubt." Anticipating critics who would argue that he was trying to sneak religion in through the back door, Fromm envisions a future where the "contents" of faith would be increasingly secular and rational. But he also suggested that "sacred and secular are not necessarily contradictory"; and, in so doing, whether by the front or the back, he did open the door that Sigmund Freud had so firmly shut.

In 1950 Fromm published *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, an outgrowth of his 1949 Terry Lectures at Yale University. Carl Jung, who had held the same lectureship back in 1937, had published his own ideas under the title *Psychology and Religion*.



Fromm thus had in the background both Jung, with his reputation as a psychoanalyst with deep religious commitments, and Freud, who has generally been cited as an arch-foe of religion. But Fromm took the position that he was far closer in spirit to Freud than to Jung. At first glance, this position seems absurd. As Gregory Zilboorg writes in "The Changing Concept of Man in Present-Day Psychiatry," "Psychiatry did not fare... well until it liberated itself from many theological preoccupations," and Freud was, of course, the chief architect of this "liberation." Yes, agrees Fromm, Freud the rationalist surely believed that illusions must be shed; religion represents both illusion (a replacement for infantile attachments) and an obstacle blocking self-understanding. But, Fromm insists, Freud was deeply attached to the ideals of brotherly love, truth, and freedom. Freud's emphasis on independence and self-awareness, says Fromm, implicitly demonstrates "his own concept of religious experience."

Jung, by contrast, is seen to have gotten religion twisted inside out. In Fromm's interpretation, the Swiss psychoanalyst aligned himself with an authoritarian concept that is hostile to the real growth of man and man's powers. He cites Jung himself: the religious experience "seizes and controls the human subject which is always rather its victim than its creator." Fromm sums up the difference this way: "Freud opposes religion in the name of ethics—an attitude which can be termed 'religious.' On the other hand, Jung reduces religion to a psychological phenomenon and at the same time elevates the unconscious to a religious phenomenon." For Fromm, who never has found William James's pragmatic approach to truth very satisfactory, James anticipated Jung, while Freud was closer in spirit to John Dewey, who "differentiates religion and religious experience."

Fromm's feeling that he has closer kinship to Freud than to Jung on this matter is not, then, altogether preposterous. Philip Rieff remarks in *Freud: The Mind of the Moralizer* that Freud based his hostility to religion on the close identification which had developed between authority and institutionalized religion—precisely Fromm's point. Fromm's own position on religion (which Rieff calls "an influential compromise"), and the reason he can find possibilities of communication between religion and psychoanalysis, is thus partially transparent. In the spirit of



Rediscovering Buried Meanings

69

many modernists, he finds ethical considerations at the heart of religion. Fromm states that a similar position was held by early Buddhism, Jesus, and Spinoza, as well as by such “secular” thinkers as Socrates and the French revolutionaries who exalted “The Religion of Reason.”

But ethics does not constitute the whole of religion. In listing man’s existential needs in *Man for Himself*, Fromm had included a “frame of orientation and an object of devotion.” This “need,” when supplied by a “system of thought and action shared by a group,” now becomes Fromm’s definition of religion. For verification that the need is general, Fromm merely points vaguely to “the universal occurrence of religion in history,” finding “no need . . . to discuss it any further.” Many critics, not unreasonably, would shake their heads at this “evidence,” and render a Scotch verdict: not proven.

Fromm ingeniously reverses Freud’s conception of the connection between neurosis and religion. Whereas Freud had said that neurosis was essentially synonymous with religion, Fromm classifies neurosis as a “private form of religion . . . a regression to primitive forms of religion conflicting with officially recognized patterns of religious thought. He offers several examples of such “regressions”: fixation on one’s parents is a modern counterpart of ancestor-worship; irrational devotion exhibited toward such symbols as flags and political parties is a modern counterpart of primitive totemism. Religious “cults” have one great advantage over “private” neurosis, he says: the whole crowd belongs to the cult, thereby enabling an individual to feel that he is part of a large, compatible group.

Some of these ideas suggest that Fromm may not be quite so far from Jungian perspectives as he tends to believe. Viktor von Weizsaecker, a psychoanalyst and philosopher who knew both Freud and Jung, writes that for Jung “neurosis was a symptom of the man who loses his support in religion,” and that Jung once said that “all neurotics seek the religious.” Von Weizsaecker concludes that while Freud “was under the illusion” that psychoanalysis was purely a medical-scientific approach, “Jung had discovered the religious core.”²

Fromm argues, however, that the key religious distinction is between authoritarian and humanistic conceptions. The Old Testament, he says, is a mixture: authoritarian when it defines sin as rebellion against God’s commands, but humanistic when



it describes the covenant between God and Abraham. And he finds similarly humanistic Jesus' precept that "the kingdom of God is within you"—which Fromm interprets as meaning that God is primarily a symbol of man's own powers. Whether a man directly affirms "religion" (e.g., Jung) or rejects it (e.g., Freud) is deemed irrelevant. By such reasoning, Fromm concludes that religion is not necessarily a "threat" to psychoanalysis at all. He believes that Freud, like Plato, became a "physician of the soul." The function once ascribed to great philosophers and religious teachers now is the province of the ethical psychoanalysts.

The timing of *Psychoanalysis and Religion* was, in a sense, acute, demonstrating once more the surprising parallelism between Fromm's concerns and contemporary cultural preoccupations. The years immediately following World War II witnessed a considerable number of books, several of them best sellers, discussing the relationship between psychology and religion. Most stressed American anxieties, and offered some systematic "positive" guidance for living. The writers that the general public came to know best were men of the cloth, Catholic Fulton J. Sheen, Jewish Joshua Loth Liebman, and, a little later, Protestant Norman Vincent Peale. When Fromm's writings on religion began to appear, embodying a basically affirmative view of man's possibilities, some critics contemptuously consigned him to the camp of the "preachers" (even Abram Kardiner once applied this term derisively to Fromm). Such a judgment was both superficial and indiscriminate. Even among the three ministers named, there were marked differences: Liebman's *Peace of Mind*, for instance, was a sensitive, intelligent book that demonstrated genuine understanding of Freudian ideas. Sheen was utterly hostile to Freud, but he was difficult to take seriously because his version of Freud was so warped by misreading and misinterpretation. As for Peale's comprehension of formal psychology and psychoanalysis, the mildest adjectives one can employ are "opportunistic," "simplistic," and "confused."³ The divergence in intellectual depth between Fromm and any of these writers should be obvious to anyone except the most naïve or biased of critics.

To some complicated matters Fromm returned in later writings for greater amplification. In *The Art of Loving* and an essay on Zen Buddhism, he examines with more care the mystical



Rediscovering Buried Meanings

71

implications of what he here defined as “the capacity to wonder.” He speaks briefly, also, in *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, of the “symbolic expression” exemplified by religious ritual, suggesting that there are parallels in the language of myth and of dreams. Such symbolic language, he said, was largely a “forgotten language,” but Freud had helped rediscover its significance, and had furnished tools for deciphering it. Appropriately, Fromm’s very next book was titled *The Forgotten Language*.

II Reconstructing Oedipus

When Sigmund Freud announced enthusiastically to Wilhelm Fliess that he had “discovered” the meaning of the Oedipal conflict, he believed he had laid the cornerstone of all psychoanalytic theory. Indeed, agrees his biographer Ernest Jones, this discovery was Freud’s greatest. In his interpretation of the triangular rivalry among parents and child, Freud was convinced he had found the kernel of all neuroses that plague mankind. For each person the secret had to be revealed anew before—if ever—successful therapy could be achieved:

There must be a voice within us which is prepared to acknowledge the compelling power of fate in the Oedipus [i.e., Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*]. . . . And there actually is a motive in the story of King Oedipus which explains the verdict of this inner voice. His fate moves us only because it might have been our own, because the oracle laid upon us before our birth the very curse which rested upon him. It may be that we were all destined to direct our first sexual impulses toward our mothers, and our first impulses of hatred and resistance toward our fathers; our dreams convince us that we were. . . . Like Oedipus, we live in ignorance of the desires that offend morality, the desires that nature has forced upon us and after their unveiling we may well prefer to avert our gaze from the scenes of our childhood.⁴

The Oedipus construct became so central in Freudian theory and therapy that every subsequent psychoanalyst felt he had to come to grips with it. He either had to accept it (with Freud’s inferences), to extend it, to revise it, or to reject it. But he could not simply ignore it. It was a very appropriate title that one historian of psychoanalysis placed on his book: *Oedipus: Myth and Complex*.

Each of the Freudian apostates reinterpreted, according to his own lights and predilections, the drama and the myth from



which it originated. Alfred Adler, for example, with his own socialization-and-power orientation, could not believe that the Oedipus complex was a “fundamental fact”; rather, he described it as “a vicious unnatural result of maternal over-indulgence.” Carl Jung agreed that incestuous tendencies could occur in childhood, but he argued that the sexuality of the unconscious was symbolic. Incest tendencies, he said, merged into and were dwarfed by a more significant familial phenomenon: the developing “archetypal” roles of the parents. For Jung, each person had a residue of historical memory, memory that constituted his portion of the “collective unconscious.” Otto Rank believed that the total pattern of child-parent relationships had to be considered—from birth on. Karen Horney argued that attitudes of dependency, hostility, and so on, might play a more crucial role than sexual elements in early family conflicts.

Fromm was familiar with all of these theories, but he also had another direct source of influence. From very early in his career, he had been impressed by the “matriarchy” theories of the anthropologist J. J. Bachofen; two of Fromm’s articles in the 1930’s had indicated his essential agreement with Bachofen, and *Escape from Freedom* had incorporated some “matriarchal” concepts in a discussion of the value shift from Medieval to early capitalist social systems. Bachofen, who had tangled with Oedipal meanings years before Freud, had concluded that Oedipus’ possession of his mother, Jocasta, was a mythic version of the transition from matriarchal to patriarchal society. Freud found *Oedipus* significant because of its presumed universality as a human motive: Bachofen found it important because of its presumable insight into the historical process.

For years, Fromm had tentatively proposed a bridge between these two emphases. He had often praised Freud’s Oedipal theories as a major breakthrough in psychoanalytic thought; but, since the late 1930’s he also had suggested that Freud exaggerated the significance of the sexual elements. By the late 1940’s, he was ready to offer his own interpretation. Its first appearance in print was in 1948, in a volume of studies, *The Family: Its Function and Destiny*. A similar version appeared a little later in *Scientific American*. The full interpretation was incorporated into Fromm’s book *The Forgotten Language* in 1951.

If, as Freud argued, the element of erotic attraction was



Rediscovering Buried Meanings

73

fundamental, why is it never directly mentioned in the play? And why should the noble Oedipus, the benefactor of Thebes, be “described as having committed the crime most horrible in the eyes of his contemporaries?” The incest theme does not seem adequate to carry the moral burden of the play. Fromm’s hypothesis is that the myth primarily symbolizes “the rebellion of the son against the authority of the father in the patriarchal family.” The son-mother marriage becomes only a subsidiary element reflecting the privileges accorded the new conqueror.

Fromm’s new “evidence” is of two kinds, literary and historical. First, he stresses that Sophocles’ *Oedipus* was not a single play but a trilogy, and that this fact matters. He knows that scholars question whether the plays were written in chronological sequence, but he believes nevertheless that *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*, which deal with later events than the more famous *Oedipus Rex*, ought to be examined also. Father-son conflicts are crucial in both the other plays. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus quarrels with, and condemns, both his sons, Eteocles and Polyneices. In *Antigone*, Haemon quarrels with his rigid father Creon and, after unsuccessfully attempting patricide, kills himself. In *Oedipus Rex*, of course, Oedipus unknowingly kills his own father, Laius, who had intended infanticide in the first place. The incest theme is subdued here; in the other two plays it is totally absent.

The basic source of conflict that runs through all three tragedies is the struggle against parental authority, most clearly exemplified in Haemon’s revolt against the authoritarian Creon. This conflict, says Fromm, hearkening back to Bachofen’s 1861 analysis, is a dramatic crystallization of the ancient struggle between patriarchal and matriarchal social systems: Oedipus, Haemon, and Antigone all represent the spirit of the latter (but historically earlier) system. So now history, or at least an anthropological reconstruction of it, is adduced. Bachofen had asserted that crucial social and moral principles were involved in the struggle: “Matriarchal culture is characterized by the emphasis on ties of blood, ties to the soil, and a passive acceptance of all natural phenomena. Patriarchal society, in contrast, is characterized by respect for man-made law, by a predominance of rational thought, and by man’s effort to change natural phenomena.”⁵

The ideal of obedience to authority thus succeeded the ideal of equality; order, rather than love, became the foundation stone



of society. One guesses that Fromm would find matriarchal culture inherently preferable from the humanitarian point of view. But Fromm is too much of a dialectical evolutionist to believe that historically later developments can be *all* bad. In *Escape from Freedom*, in discussing the transition from the Medieval (largely matriarchal) society to the Renaissance and Reformation (largely patriarchal) periods, and also in a more general way, in an article, "Man-Woman," Fromm suggests that a blend of the two social orientations seems best. Love *and* rationalism, passivity *and* activity, are all necessary for Fromm's sane society. In the 1970's, Fromm has examined the question again, as he has so many others, in the light of recent history, and finds a return toward matriarchal principles, but in a form that he believes "regressive."

As for the riddle of the Sphinx in *Oedipus Rex*, Fromm argues that its importance is implied by the Sphinx: "He who knows that the most important answer man can give to the most difficult question with which he is confronted is that man himself can save mankind." So Fromm finds the humanistic principle embodied in the person of Oedipus, just as it is asserted by Antigone and Haemon. Sophocles, says Fromm, who espoused the pre-Olympian virtues of love, equality, and justice, was opposing authoritarianism and "moral opportunism," which in the trilogy is personified most vigorously by Creon.

Just as Freud and Jung, therefore, found in the Classical myth-and-drama a parable for the secret heart of man, so too does Fromm, according to his own evidence and beliefs. His interpretation, as one might expect, has been accepted with no more finality than those of his predecessors. Freud, of course, has acquired something resembling first patent rights, at least insofar as psychoanalytic interpretations are concerned. But Freud's pristine version of the "meaning" of Oedipus is now widely viewed, despite its esthetic, dramatic power, as a construct that *may* have validity for some families in some cultural configurations, and sociologists and cultural anthropologists have quite effectively undermined its pretense to universality. And the psychoanalysts, it might be noted, have not yet finished with either the play or the myth. New interpretations have been offered in recent years, and some of the most imaginative have come from the comparatively new direction of "existential" psychoanalysis.⁶



Rediscovering Buried Meanings

75

III Symbolic Theory and Humanistic Therapy

In 1951 Fromm moved with his second wife, Henni, to Mexico City. Mrs. Fromm was ill, and their physician hoped for curative powers in the Mexican climate and waters. When the National University of Mexico offered Fromm the directorship of a course of training for psychoanalysts at its medical school, he accepted. Although Henni died in 1952, Fromm stayed in Mexico, marrying Annis Freeman the following year. He has continued to spend part of his time in the United States. Since 1951 he has served on the faculty of the William Alanson White Institute of Psychiatry in New York; and in recent years he has also been associated with New York University and the New School of Social Research. From 1957 through 1961, he taught seminars at Michigan State University.

Despite Fromm's various positions in the United States and Mexico (where he is now director of the Mexican Institute of Psychoanalysis and professor of psychoanalysis at the medical school), he continued to write steadily—six books appeared between 1951 and 1961. The year he went to Mexico, he published *The Forgotten Language*, in which his essay about Oedipus appeared. The focus of the book was symbolic language seen from a psychoanalytic point of view, with materials based on lectures he had given at Bennington College.

Symbolic language, he said, possesses its own special logic, grammar, and syntax; and it is man's only universal language. It is a language one must grasp because "its understanding brings us in touch with one of the most significant sources of wisdom, that of the myth, and it brings us in touch with the deeper layers of our own personalities." Fromm's general outline of symbolic theory is not especially original; but, considering the difficulties of the topic, it is unusually concise and lucid. Briefly, he discusses three orders of symbols: "conventional," "accidental," and "universal." Conventional symbols can be exemplified by words which stand for familiar objects; their "meaning" becomes common currency because people share a particular culture at a particular time. Accidental symbols are created by individual experience and the connotations which become attached; they are one's "private" meanings. Universal symbols develop out of intrinsic relationships between a symbol and the object or idea which it represents. Fire and water, for



example, “suggest by their very nature certain emotional and mental experiences” which are in turn symbolized. Of course, fire and water may generate different connotations in different civilizations and at different times—these variations Fromm calls “dialects” of the universal symbolic language.

Fromm’s symbolic analysis differs from that of Carl Jung and some anthropologists in several respects. Jung postulated basic symbolic constructions, “archetypes,” common to all men. At least some of the time (Jung was ambiguous on this matter) these “archetypes” supposedly derived from a pan-human “racial memory.” Fromm finds the racial inheritance theory unscientific and extraneous, as do most social scientists, since the “meanings” of these symbols are accessible to everyone. Additionally, Fromm stresses the importance of “conventional” symbols, whereas the well-known cultural anthropologist Joseph Campbell (*Hero with a Thousand Faces*) minimizes them. The distinction is significant, because “conventional” symbols are the products of history and culture—extremely basic considerations in Fromm’s over-all theory of man.⁷

Aside from Fromm’s interpretation of the Oedipus myth, which has already been discussed, *The Forgotten Language* also contains a brief analysis of the “feminist triumph” in the tale generally known as “Little Red Riding-hood,” and a slightly more extended interpretation of Kafka’s *The Trial* than had appeared in *Psychoanalysis and Religion*. Both pieces are provocative, and legends and literature are fruitful fields for symbolic investigation. But Fromm’s interpretations are too restricted in their focus; literary exegesis is not his specialty.

The largest section of the book is devoted to dream analysis. Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* is a classic of psychoanalysis, as well as Freud’s own favorite among his works. He believed that dreams reveal our innermost passions and fear; the dream, he said, is the “royal road to the unconscious.” Fromm concurs, but he differs sharply from Freud, and from Jung, on the nature of the “self” revealed in dreams and on what it can tell the dreamer.

Freud had assumed that man’s basic strivings are repressed by a powerful “censor,” in the form of neurotic symptoms. But during sleep, he said, the censor is weakened; and one’s strivings, especially prohibited sexual desires, leap to life in dreams. Since, for Freud, all the irrational urges are rooted in childhood



Rediscovering Buried Meanings

77

fantasies and frustrations connected with the Oedipal triangle, most symbols are sexual; and the dreaming adult is in reality the child reasserting itself. As for Jung, his interpretations of dreams hinge on his belief that there is a “source of revelation transcending us.” The dream thus becomes an impersonal event, a fount of external wisdom and truth. For Freud, dreams are largely the distorted imagery of primitive sexual urges; for Jung, dreams are a symbolic panorama of Jungian religious concepts.

Fromm believes that dreams are more personal than Jung believed and not necessarily so irrational as Freud believed. The dream state is ambivalent, Fromm says: “We are not only less reasonable and less decent in our dreams but . . . we are also more intelligent, wiser, and capable of better judgment.” Rejecting both Plato’s idealism and Freud’s hostile view of civilization, Fromm argues that culture can be either beneficial or detrimental; cultural impact on man’s total emotional condition can go in any of several directions. In sleep, “the lack of contact with culture makes for the appearance both of our worst and of our best.” But one decides whether a dream expresses irrational passions or the voice of reason through “external data.” When one knows who the dreamer is, the kind of man he is, the quality of his insights into his own abilities and aspirations, and his mood on falling asleep, one can often find out much about the “reality” behind the dream.

Fromm devotes a substantial chapter of *The Forgotten Language* to his own method of dream interpretation, coupling dream material with hypothetical dialogues between analyst and patient. He continually stresses how the dream should be related to the available “external data.” Full comprehension of a dream, he says, requires awareness of “the reaction to a significant event which happened before the dream occurred.” The analyst’s role, Fromm believes, is to prod, to remind, to encourage, and to seek out the relevant threads of memory and feeling that might enable the patient to translate the “manifest,” literal, content of the dream into its “latent,” concealed, meanings. Fromm’s descriptions of how he approaches dream interpretation represent, incidentally, a major departure for him. He has rarely, except in such brief instances as his discussion of Otto Rank’s “will therapy,” written about his own particular approach to the clinical situation. Even a sympathetic observer, Clara Thompson, who believed Fromm’s theories had important implications



for psychoanalyst and patient, noted that he had “written very little about the therapeutic process.” She wondered, for example, whether Fromm, who was very concerned about the importance of expressing one’s convictions, tended to slip into moral condemnation of the patient. “Fromm himself,” she said in 1951, in *Psychoanalysis: Evolution and Development*, “feels he has not yet adequately clarified this concept.”

Fromm also has rarely offered clinical illustrations of his own. Karl Menninger noted this lack, with asperity, in 1942; psychiatrist J. A. C. Brown commented similarly in 1961: “Fromm makes no reference to any facts observed by himself, quotes no cases, and nowhere describes his own techniques of analysis.” To complete the list of related “gaps,” Fromm also has been charged with failing to keep up with current psychoanalytical literature; if he does, he gives little indication of it in his own published writings.

The three problems might be examined in reverse order. First, why so few citations to recent psychoanalytical research? His major theoretical source always had been Freud. Occasionally he has cited the theories of Jung; in rarer instances, those of Adler, Reich, Rank, from all of whom he has absorbed ideas. In the 1940’s he tended to make brief references to onetime colleagues Karen Horney, Harry Stack Sullivan, Ernest Schachtel. It may be that Fromm feels that his most useful psychoanalytical contribution lies in relating his own ideas to traditional philosophical speculations, to current events, and to the diversified expanding knowledge of the social sciences. He has made it clear enough, from 1955 on, that he considers the main line of psychoanalytical research ossified because of slavish devotion to Freudian orthodoxy. Nevertheless, clinical research in the past twenty years by “existential” psychoanalysts, “humanistic” psychologists, and others could have been adduced to some effect, because a number of conclusions have tended to parallel Fromm’s.

Why so few clinical illustrations of his own? Psychoanalysts from Freud on have made this technique a staple of their presentation. Indeed, Freud’s “Anna O.” and “little Hans” have become almost as well known as characters from literature, and Freud’s use of such “real-life” materials brought great vitality to his work. Fromm may have been motivated in part by a sense of urgency and audience. He quite likely feels that the immediate hazards of the human situation demand a wide popular audience



Rediscovering Buried Meanings

79

and, rightly or wrongly, he has minimized very technical or detailed particulars. Readability always has been a hallmark of his style, and his work probably has been, at least since *Escape from Freedom*, more attractive to the general intellectual audience than to fellow specialists. Sometimes he has referred in an abstract, offhand manner to “psychoanalytic observations” which he cannot furnish “without transcending the scope of this book.” Pressed recently on this matter, Fromm stressed another explanation. To refer to real cases, he said, could lead to a dangerous invasion of privacy. Even with the names disguised, it would be difficult to relate what patients said and did in any detail without trespassing on their anonymity.

In regard to both citation and illustration, Fromm may have committed a tactical error—at least insofar as many readers have been concerned. He seems to sense this fact, and, he says, in his projected comprehensive study of psychoanalytic theory and therapy, he will indeed be furnishing a considerable amount of direct documentation.

Finally, what about his own therapeutic techniques? Freud had postulated three methods for unlocking the unconscious: through dream interpretation, through “free association,” and through the mechanism of “transference.” In *The Forgotten Language*, Fromm delineated some of the techniques he employed in dream interpretation. In a paper presented to colleagues in 1954, he offered his views on “free association.” And in Richard Evans’s *Dialogue with Erich Fromm*, in 1966, he spoke about his attitudes toward “transference.” These discussions in no way compare with the substantial writings about technique of most other psychoanalytic authors, but they do add up to some reasonably clear insights into what Fromm does in the therapeutic situation.

The Freudian method of “free association” was an attempt to uncover buried feelings by having the patient voice any ideas or sentiments that occurred to him. The patient, if he felt like it, was free to ignore conventional forms of expression, or propriety, or logical sequence, or any of the other restrictions that social awareness places on free utterance. In a sense, says Fromm, Freud was counseling: “Go ahead—free associate.” This promising idea, says Fromm, too often deteriorated into an empty ritual. Spontaneous association (as imitators of James Joyce and Gertrude Stein have discovered) frequently ends up as



meaningless clatter or nothing more than a “friendly dialogue.”

But Fromm believes that the heart of the method is still valuable, and to salvage its usefulness he proposes various prompting, controlling devices. “Tell me what is in your mind *right now*,” the psychoanalyst might say, thus creating a sense of urgency. Or he might pinpoint a subject: “What comes to your mind about your father?” Or he might supply a hypothetical situation and ask the patient to relate whatever comes into his mind.

Fromm also cites some methods developed by Augusta Slesinger. For example, the patient would be told to keep his mind a blank, perhaps by visualizing an empty movie screen. Then, at the analyst’s sudden cue of “Now!,” the patient would begin to talk. The idea, of course, is to create a short period of total concentration, bypassing conventional thought processes. By the use of such devices, says Fromm, the analyst can nudge the patient toward self-awareness without in any way interfering with real freedom of expression. But more than that, Fromm believes the analyst should himself become *involved*. On this issue Fromm, like Horney and Sullivan, is following in the path pioneered by Sandor Ferenczi. Freud had insisted that the only posture for the analyst was detachment; Ferenczi experimented with transforming the analytic role into one of genuine sympathy for the patient. Therapist and client were not merely to enact parts during the clinical sessions—they were to be themselves, two human beings who cared.

The analyst’s role, says Fromm, should be what Sullivan had called “participant observer.” Of course, the analyst functions as teacher and guide, but he ought also to keep developing his own imagination and to grasp emotion from the inside. “We are all crazy,” says Fromm; “we are all neurotic, we are all children, and the difference between us is only of degree. But unless we can mobilize in ourselves the very same irrational fantasy which exists in patients, we certainly cannot understand them.”⁸ Over the years, many analysts have edged away from what Fromm calls the “neutral, distant” attitude toward patients, just as the stereotyped couch has become an optional, or totally dispensable, fixture in their offices. But probably few analysts have gone as far as Fromm recommends. As Martin Birnbach asks in *Neo-Freudian Social Philosophy*, “Is the aim to be psychic rehabilitation or an interpersonal union?” This is hyper-



Rediscovering Buried Meanings

81

bole to be sure, but most analysts surely would hesitate at “mobilizing” such “fantasies” during office hours.

Specifically, Fromm is alluding here to what Freud had called “transference,” the third technique for self-revelation of the unconscious. Freud meant that the patient, in the course of analysis, “transferred” feelings about his parents onto the person of the analyst. One psychoanalytic glossary describes transference as “distorted perception of the present in terms of the past.” In response to questions raised in Richard Evans’ “dialogue,” Fromm expressed some views about this technique. He accepts the value and importance of this “irrational relatedness,” and he offers two extensions. First, he believes it to be a phenomenon that transcends the psychoanalytic situation: similar behavior can be discerned when anyone wants “to be protected by a powerful person” or to “take refuge” in a greatly admired boss, teacher, or minister.

Second, he feels that the analyst-patient relationship ought to be deeper than this single “dependence” phenomenon suggests. Two people are talking, both share, and both can learn. Reciprocation implies that not only transference but also “countertransference” takes place. “I was trained as an orthodox Freudian analyst,” he recalls. “But I became increasingly dissatisfied with what I encountered. . . . I found myself becoming bored.” Out of his own clinical experiences and conclusions, Fromm says here and elsewhere, his own theories developed—not the other way around.

About other psychiatric techniques, Fromm has had little to say. Neither drugs nor shock therapy, for example, have ever much interested him. He has never done group therapy, and he admits to a “dislike” of the idea. Deep problems are too personal, and, too often, “the atmosphere of privacy is being continually eroded.”

Can therapy save man? Hardly, says Fromm, who believes that radical changes must be made in all spheres of life. But even where therapy doesn’t bring major improvements, he is convinced—as not all observers are—that it doesn’t do any harm. And in therapeutic activity at its best, “a person gets in touch with himself, with the dissociated personality, and something happens, possible a miracle . . . energy is freed. The total personality has again provided the possibility of reorganizing itself.”⁹