

Erich Fromm: The Integrity of the Self and the Practice of Love

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I. Life and Works

Erich Fromm (1900-1980) was a psychoanalyst and social psychologist associated with the Frankfurt School of social theory and often credited with forging key links between Marxist and Freudian thought. Born to Orthodox Jewish parents, Fromm briefly studied law and jurisprudence at the University of Frankfurt am Main and then, at Heidelberg, sociology under Max Weber's brother Alfred, psychology under Karl Jaspers and philosophy under Heinrich Rickert. After earning his PhD in sociology from Heidelberg in 1922, Fromm went on—under the influence of Frieda Reichmann, whom he later married—to train as a psychoanalyst and to begin his own clinical practice. At this time he was also appointed by Max Horkheimer as chief psychological expert of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research (the so-called “Frankfurt School”).¹

When the Nazis came to power in Germany, the Frankfurt School moved to Geneva and then the USA, becoming established at Columbia University in 1934. Following an invitation from the Chicago Psychoanalytic Institute to give a series of lectures in 1933, Fromm moved from Switzerland to the USA, holding throughout the 1940s a series of teaching positions at Columbia, Michigan, Yale and New York Universities and Bennington College, Vermont. He became a US citizen in 1940, but in 1950 moved to Mexico, its climate better suiting his second wife's health needs. Fromm taught at the National Autonomous University in Mexico City (UNAM) until 1965 (afterwards becoming professor emeritus there), while also holding various posts in the USA and maintaining his psychoanalytic practice. Fromm's political engagements during this time included the international peace movement, and arguing against both Western capitalism and Soviet Communism in the American Socialist Party. After retirement from UNAM, Fromm wrote productively, including during the very last years of his life after his move, along with his third wife, back to Switzerland in 1974. He died in 1980, a few days short of his eightieth birthday.

Amongst the most significant of Fromm's works for our purposes are his first important monograph, *Escape from Freedom* or *The Fear of Freedom*² and *The Art of*

¹ Rainer Funk, “Erich Fromm's Life and Work,” in K. Anderson and R. Quinnes (eds.) *Erich Fromm and Critical Criminology. Beyond the Punitive Society*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press 2000, p. 7.

² Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom*, London: Routledge 2001 [1941]. This work was published under the former title in North America, the latter in the UK and other parts of the English-speaking world. I shall use the latter title here.

Loving,³ both of which we shall discuss in some detail below. Other important texts include *Man for Himself*,⁴ where Fromm developed a humanistic ethics and “characterology” that goes beyond Freud’s libido theory; *Psychoanalysis and Religion*,⁵ a extension of the ideas of *Man for Himself* beyond ethics into religion; *The Sane Society*,⁶ which discusses alienation in capitalist and bureaucratic society and argues for a democratic and humanistic socialism; *You Shall Be as Gods*,⁷ which argues for a variety of non-theistic religion; and *To Have or To Be?*,⁸ in which the acquisitive, materialistic “having” mode is contrasted unfavorably with the “being” mode manifested in shared experience and rooted in love.

As will be seen from the above, one of Fromm’s abiding concerns was the relation between the individual and society. But perhaps to put it thus is slightly misleading. As Rainer Funk explains, for Fromm:

“It was no longer valid to say ‘here I am and there is society’; but rather, ‘I am primarily a reflection of society, in that my unconscious is socially determined and I therefore reflect and realize the secret expectations, requirements, wishes, fears, and strivings of society in my own passionate strivings.’ In reality, none of the following—not the apparent separation of society and individual, not the apparent separation of conscious and unconscious, not the apparent separation of society and unconscious—actually exist. All of these dimensions are in the social unconscious of every single human being.”⁹

One commentator has described Fromm as “[t]he psychoanalyst who probably thought the most about the relationship of culture and the individual.”¹⁰

Though initially influenced by Freud, like many other psychoanalysts, Fromm eventually broke with Freudian thought. The reasons are complex, but one key aspect is given towards the end of *The Fear of Freedom*:

We believe that man is *primarily* a social being, and not, as Freud assumes, primarily self-sufficient and only secondarily in need of others in order to satisfy his instinctual needs. In this sense, we believe that individual psychology is fundamentally social psychology or...the psychology of interpersonal relationships; the key problem of psychology is that of the particular kind of relatedness of the individual toward the world, not that of satisfaction or frustration of single instinctual desires.¹¹

This focus on selfhood as relational might already ring some Kierkegaardian bells: we shall return to this in more detail below.

³ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving: An Inquiry into the Nature of Love*, New York: Harper and Row 1956. Quotations are from the following edition: London: Thorsons 1995.

⁴ Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself. An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*, New York: Rinehart and Co. 1947.

⁵ Erich Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press 1950.

⁶ Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1955.

⁷ Erich Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and Its Tradition*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1966.

⁸ Erich Fromm, *To Have or to Be?* New York: Harper and Row 1976.

⁹ “Erich Fromm’s Life and Work”, p. 9.

¹⁰ James W. Jones, *Terror and Transformation: The Ambiguity of Religion in Psychoanalytic Perspective*, Hove and New York: Taylor and Francis 2002, p. 46.

¹¹ Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom*, p. 249.

II. En passant: Fromm on Kierkegaard¹²

In *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker cites Kierkegaard as an important precursor to psychoanalysis.¹³ Kierkegaard is routinely cited as an early “depth psychologist” and of course addresses at length such topics as anxiety and despair. Yet in common with other psychoanalysts such as Jung and Kristeva, Fromm has little to say in any detail about Kierkegaard. Rarely does the latter receive more than one reference in any given Fromm text, and often, when he is mentioned, it is on a list of (allegedly) comparable thinkers, Nietzsche and Marx being probably the most common bedfellows. For instance, Kierkegaard is mentioned explicitly just once in *The Fear of Freedom*, being listed, along with Nietzsche and Kafka, as one of the “visionary thinkers”¹⁴ who had already foreseen some of the themes of twentieth century life that Fromm seeks to describe and diagnose in this book. Kierkegaard, we are told, “describes the helpless individual torn and tormented by doubts, overwhelmed by the feeling of aloneness and insignificance.”¹⁵ Another comparison with Nietzsche occurs in *Psychoanalysis and Religion* where, talking about the—in many ways regrettable—development of psychology as a science, Fromm complains that: “Notwithstanding exceptional figures like Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, the tradition in which psychology was a study of the soul concerned with man’s virtue and happiness was abandoned.”¹⁶ Kierkegaard starts to emerge as being, for Fromm, an insightful yet largely ignored figure, a man before his time.¹⁷ A further such comparison is with both Marx and Nietzsche as a significant protestor against alienation.¹⁸ In the nineteenth century, the prophetic voices of this trio were “muted by the apparent success of capitalist industrialism,” but such protests against “the dehumanization of man” were heard more loudly during and after the Second World War.¹⁹ Indeed, earlier in the same chapter, Fromm claims that:

¹² For enormous help in tracking down the references to Kierkegaard in Fromm’s writings, I am extremely grateful to Fromm’s literary executor, Rainer Funk.

¹³ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, New York: Simon and Schuster 1973, chapter 5, pp. 67-92.

¹⁴ Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom*, p. 114.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, p. 5.

¹⁷ Other places where Kierkegaard is mentioned in passing as one on a list of thinkers are as follows. He is listed amongst those, including Marx and Nietzsche again, but also Kant, Darwin, Bergson, Joyce and Picasso, who express “Western man’s desire to relinquish false gods, to do away with illusions and to grasp himself and the world as part of a total reality” (*Sigmund Freud’s Mission*, New York: Harper and Row 1959, p. 116). Later, he is one of those—along with humanist socialism, Schweitzer, Russell and Einstein—the underlying theme of whose thought is “the concept of the unity of the human race, and of humanity contained in each individual as a potential” (“Humanism and Psychoanalysis,” *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, vol. 1-1, 1964, p. 71). He is also claimed to keep company with Spinoza, Kant, Feuerbach, Marx, Freud and Scheler in teaching, like St John Chrysostomus before them, that “sin was to consider man as a means or a tool” (Erich Fromm and Ramon Xirau (eds), *The Nature of Man*, New York: Macmillan 1968, p. 12). Finally, in a posthumously published paper written in 1969, Fromm quotes R.D. Laing’s view that Kierkegaard—like Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, Tillich and Sartre—had the realization that “Humanity is estranged from its authentic possibilities. This basic vision prevents us from taking any unequivocal view of the sanity of common sense, or of the madness of the so-called madmen.” (“The Dialectic Revision of Psychoanalysis,” in Erich Fromm, *The Revision of Psychoanalysis*, Boulder: Westview Press 1992 [1969], p. 61). Kierkegaard was, of course, an influence on what is probably Laing’s best-known book, *The Divided Self*.

¹⁸ *Marx’s Concept of Man*, New York: Frederick Ungar 1961, p. 72.

¹⁹ Ibid.

the whole existentialist philosophy, from Kierkegaard on, is, as Paul Tillich puts it, “an over one-hundred-years-old movement of rebellion against the dehumanization of man in industrial society.” Actually, the concept of alienation is, in nontheistic language, the equivalent of what in theistic language would be called “sin”: man’s relinquishment of himself, of God within himself.²⁰

Marx is portrayed here as an alternative to Kierkegaard: both are concerned with “the salvation of the individual,” Marx’s primary concern with capitalist society being “its destruction of individuality and its enslavement of man...by things and circumstances of their own making.”²¹ (This, as we shall see from section III, is a return to a central theme of *The Fear of Freedom*.) But earlier, in the preface, Kierkegaard has been unfavorably compared to Marx, as being insufficiently attuned to the importance of class and social issues: “in contrast to Kierkegaard and others, Marx sees man in his full concreteness as a member of a given society and of a given class, aided in his development by society, and at the same time its captive.”²² This theme, of Marx as going beyond Kierkegaard in an important respect, is repeated a year later:

Precisely because alienation has reached a point where it borders on insanity in the whole industrialised world, undermining and destroying its religious, spiritual, and political traditions and threatening general destruction through nuclear war, many are better able to see that Marx had recognized the central issue of modern man’s sickness; that he had not only seen, as Feuerbach and Kierkegaard had, this “sickness” but that he had shown that contemporary idolatry is rooted in the contemporary mode of production and can be changed only by the complete change of the economic-social constellation together with the spiritual liberation of man.²³

Nevertheless, Kierkegaard continues to be credited for recognizing the importance of maximizing “individuality.” Demonstrating that he views it as possible to be a “humanist” in a theistic as well as a non-theistic sense, Fromm claims: “Some Humanist thinkers—among them Leibniz, Goethe, Kierkegaard and Marx—particularly stressed the need to develop individuality to the greatest possible extent in order to achieve the highest harmony and universality.”²⁴ However, rather dubiously with respect to Kierkegaard, he adds: “all Humanists have shared a belief in the possibility of man’s perfectibility, which, whether they believed in the need for God’s grace or not, they saw as dependent upon man’s own efforts (which is why Luther was not a Humanist).”²⁵ Kierkegaard’s proximity to Luther on such a point appears not to be recognized. Similarly, in *The Nature of Man*, Kierkegaard appears on another list of philosophers who perceive that “man *makes himself*; that man is the author of his own history.”²⁶ This is perhaps because Fromm associates Kierkegaard with the existentialists, and we are told that they “have told us that we lack an essence, that we

²⁰ Ibid., p. 47.

²¹ Ibid., p. 49.

²² Ibid., pp. v-vi.

²³ Erich Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion: My Encounter with Marx and Freud*, New York: Simon and Schuster 1962, p. 59.

²⁴ From Fromm’s ‘Introduction’ to Erich Fromm (ed.), *Socialist Humanism: An International Symposium*, New York: Doubleday 1965, p. vii.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Erich Fromm, *The Nature of Man*, p. 6.

are in the first instance an existence, that is, that we are that which we make of ourselves during the course of our life.”²⁷ It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Kierkegaard is here being turned into Sartre. On the other hand, Fromm goes on to gloss the idea that “man is historical and temporal” in a way that does bring us closer to a Kierkegaardian view: “Man no longer *is* rational; he *becomes* rational. He no longer *is* social; he *becomes* social. He no longer *is* religious; he *becomes* religious.”²⁸

Finally, there is what appears to be the only explicit reference to a specific Kierkegaard text in Fromm’s work. *The Art of Being* contains a short chapter entitled “To Will One Thing,” and *Purity of Heart* is referenced in a footnote.²⁹ Willing one thing is heralded as “[t]he first condition for more than mediocre achievement in any field, including that of the art of living.”³⁰ There is a reference here to the problem of double-mindedness: “Where energies are split in different directions, an aim is not only striven for with diminished energy, but the split of energies has the effect of weakening them in both directions by the constant conflicts that are engendered.”³¹ However, Fromm does not seem concerned with the full Kierkegaardian resonances of that term: his subsequent discussion is not committed to the idea that only the good can genuinely be willed without double-mindedness.

In sum, the generally passing nature of Fromm’s references to Kierkegaard leads one to suspect that his knowledge of the latter was not especially detailed. As an educated German who came to intellectual maturity in the first half of the twentieth century, Fromm could not have avoided knowing something of Kierkegaard, and he seems in general to have liked what he saw. But his personal library seems to have contained relatively few Kierkegaard titles.³² Rainer Funk has suggested that the reading of Kierkegaard may have been inspired by the personal contact Fromm had with Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr.³³

Despite the paucity of explicit references to Kierkegaard in *The Fear of Freedom*, that book develops a number of Kierkegaardian themes and there remain numerous significant points of contact between Fromm’s thought and Kierkegaard’s. Let us turn, then, to two such themes: the loss of the self through “automaton conformity” and the central importance of love, aspects of which I shall supplement with

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 7.

²⁹ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Being*, New York: Continuum 1992, p. 31. As the editor’s foreword (by Rainer Funk) explains, this text consists of selected chapters that Fromm wrote at the time (1974-76) that he was composing *To Have or to Be?* but which were not included in that earlier text. *The Art of Being* was published posthumously.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² I advance this claim with considerable caution. That two-thirds of Fromm’s final library archived in Germany contains a German language anthology of Kierkegaard’s writings, *Religion der Tat* (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag 1948); *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death* (New York: Doubleday Anchor 1954); *Purity of Heart is to will one Thing* (New York: Harper & Brothers 1956) and *Either/ Or* (New York: Anchor Books 1959), volumes 1 and 2. *Religion der Tat* and *Purity of Heart* contain various underlinings, but *Either/Or* does not. However, this does not account for the books Fromm had to leave in Europe when moving to the USA in 1934; some not taken to Mexico in 1950; or the remaining one third of his final library that remains in Mexico. I am grateful to Rainer Funk for this information.

³³ In personal correspondence.

a more detailed discussion of what is arguably Fromm's best-known book, *The Art of Loving*.³⁴

III. Selfhood: "automaton conformity" and the Loss of the Self

An absolutely central idea to the thought of both Kierkegaard and Fromm is the importance of becoming a (genuine) self. Selfhood, far from being a "given," is a goal, a task. This theme, which runs throughout Kierkegaard's work, receives one of its most famous articulations at the start of *The Sickness Unto Death*. The self is a synthesis of ostensible opposites—finite and infinite; freedom and necessity; temporal and eternal—that must be held together in a (creative) tension. In thus relating to itself and willing to be itself, the self "rests transparently in the power that established it."³⁵ (This is later defined as faith.³⁶) This last vital point—the unapologetic insistence on our utter dependence upon God—is what will ultimately divide Fromm from Kierkegaard. The self-knowledge that *Sickness* urges upon us is that our true position is dependency. The human self being "a derived, established relation,"³⁷ we must acknowledge our creatureliness and—as Augustine insists in the *Confessions*—find our rest and contentment therein. (Or as Kierkegaard puts it in the title of an upbuilding discourse, "To need God is a human being's highest perfection."³⁸) Both the resistance to this idea, and the delicate balance needed between these aspects of selfhood, mean that we are far more likely than not to fall into some version(s) or other of the forms of despair Anti-Climacus catalogues in *Sickness*. And notwithstanding the crucial difference mentioned above, there remain important parallels between Kierkegaard and Fromm on this last point. We might say that they agree on the diagnosis of the disease, if not on the cure. More specifically, what Fromm calls "automaton conformity" sounds like one of the varieties of Anti-Climacean despair. In noting this below, we shall see that Fromm's remark explicitly about Kierkegaard above is somewhat misleading, insofar as it downplays the importance of self-deception and ability to "hide" from oneself the feelings there described.

We will best understand Fromm's concerns about "automaton conformity" by understanding the central ideas of *The Fear of Freedom*. The book, says Fromm, is about "the meaning of freedom for modern man,"³⁹ and its central thesis is as follows:

modern man, freed from the bonds of pre-individualistic society, which simultaneously gave him security and limited him, has not gained freedom in the positive sense of the realization of his individual self; that is, the expression of his intellectual, emotional and sensuous potentialities. Freedom, though it has brought him independence and rationality, has made him isolated and, thereby, anxious and powerless. This situation is unbearable and the alternatives he is confronted with are either to escape from the burden of this freedom into new dependencies and submission, or to advance to the full realization of

³⁴ This book is a long-standing bestseller and now being marketed in a series with the title "Classics of Personal Development."

³⁵ SKS 11, 129 / SUD, 13.

³⁶ SKS 11, 164 / SUD, 49.

³⁷ SKS 11, 130 / SUD, 13.

³⁸ SKS 5, 291-316 / EUD, 297-326.

³⁹ Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom*, p. viii.

positive freedom which is based upon the uniqueness and individuality of man.⁴⁰

“Automaton conformity,” for Fromm, is one of main “mechanisms of escape” to which modern man succumbs in order to escape the burden of freedom. Indeed, it is “the solution that the majority of normal individuals find in modern society.”⁴¹ Here, Fromm is returning to a theme which, he claims in *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*, had occupied him as a young man at the end of the First World War: “the wish to understand the irrationality of human mass behaviour.”⁴² Yet what he says about it sounds strikingly Kierkegaardian: “the individual ceases to be himself; he adopts entirely the kind of personality offered to him by cultural patterns; and he therefore becomes exactly as all others are and as they expect him to be. The discrepancy between ‘I’ and the world disappears and with it the conscious fear of aloneness and powerlessness.”⁴³ Comparing such people to animal camouflage, Fromm goes on to claim: “The person who gives up his individual self and becomes an automaton, identical with millions of other automatons (sic) around him, need not feel alone and anxious any more. But the price he pays...is high; it is the loss of his self.”⁴⁴

This idea will be very familiar to readers of Kierkegaard. As well as the famous attack on “the crowd,” we might recall the confused and inauthentic relation to ethical demands ridiculed by Climacus in the *Postscript* when he compares those whose ethical behavior is purely a function of how they see others behave, like children at a party whose mother has told them to “mind your manners and watch the other polite children and behave as they do.”⁴⁵ Such a person “would never do anything first and would never have any opinion unless he first knew that others had it.”⁴⁶ Most importantly of all, perhaps, compare the idea, in *Sickness*, that “[e]very human being is primitively intended to be a self, destined to become himself.”⁴⁷ Yet it is vital not to be “ground down smooth” rather than merely “ground into shape.” Anti-Climacus expresses a concern about the kind of despair—that of lacking “infinity”—which “seems to permit itself to be tricked out of its self by ‘the others.’ Surrounded by hordes of men, absorbed in all sorts of secular matters, more and more shrewd about the ways of the world—such a person forgets himself, forgets his name divinely understood, does not dare to believe in himself, finds it too hazardous to be himself and far easier and safer to be like the others, to become a copy, a number, a mass man.”⁴⁸ Just as Fromm notes that “automaton conformity” is the most common “mechanism of escape” from the burden of freedom, so Anti-Climacus claims, “this form of despair goes practically unnoticed in the world.”⁴⁹

Fromm’s concern is essentially with a lack of originality and authenticity, essentially what Kierkegaard is highlighting in his criticisms of those who lack *Primitivitet*. Amongst the examples he gives of “automaton” thinking is a person judging, say,

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. ix.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 159.

⁴² Erich Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*, p. 6.

⁴³ Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom*, p. 159.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ SKS 7, 222 / CUP1, 244.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ SKS 11, 149 / SUD, 33.

⁴⁸ SKS 11, 149 / SUD, 33-4.

⁴⁹ SKS 11, 149 / SUD, 34.

a Rembrandt as beautiful not because of any genuine inner response but because he knows he is supposed to find it so. Or, in photographing a well-known piece of scenery, reproducing the picture as he has seen it countless times before on post-cards.⁵⁰ But there are deeper existential concerns with people not knowing who they really are. For instance, the man who believes that he “wants” to get married but who is “actually...caught up in a sequence of events which leads to marriage and seems to block every escape.”⁵¹ His true uncertainties only come to the fore with the “cold feet” he discovers on the morning of the wedding, but “if he is ‘sensible’ this feeling only lasts for a few minutes, and he will answer the question whether it is his intention to marry with the unshakable conviction that it is.”⁵² This is but one example, claims Fromm, of countless instances in everyday life in which people seem to make genuinely free decisions, but are in fact following internal or external pressures of “having” to want the thing they are going to do:

As a matter of fact, in watching the phenomenon of human decisions, one is struck by the extent to which people are mistaken in taking as “their” decision what in effect is submission to convention, duty or simple pressure. It almost seems that “original” decision is a comparatively rare phenomenon in a society which supposedly makes individual decision the cornerstone of its existence.⁵³

Later, Fromm makes an equivalent point with respect to genuine and pseudo-emotions.⁵⁴ In such ways, “the original self is completely suffocated by the pseudo self.”⁵⁵ And for Fromm, “the psychoanalytic procedure is essentially a process in which a person tries to uncover this original self.”⁵⁶ Fromm claims that Freud focused excessively the repression of the “bad,” but not sufficiently the extent to which the “good” are also subject to repression under social pressures and fear of ridicule or attack.⁵⁷

Fromm returns to this theme in his discussion of “the illusion of individuality” in democratic society. “The right to express our thoughts,” he points out, “means something only if we are able to have thoughts of our own.”⁵⁸ “Originality” does not mean that an idea has never previously been thought, but “that it is the result of [a person’s] own activity and in this sense is his thought.”⁵⁹ There can be a lack of originality in willing as well as in thinking and feeling, as when people do not ask themselves whether the aims they pursue—more money; a bigger house; a better car—are what they really want. Fromm’s key thought here is also one that seems to run through Kierkegaard’s work, about the deep desire for meaning human beings have, and yet how they often hide from themselves these “frightening”⁶⁰ central questions about the “meaning of life.” The key point is that conformity and the loss of the self

⁵⁰ *The Fear of Freedom*, p. 165.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 176n.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

are mutually reinforcing: “He thinks, feels, and wills what he believes he is supposed to think, feel, and will; in this very process he loses his self upon which all genuine security of a free individual must be built.”⁶¹ However, at the same time, “The loss of the self has increased the necessity to conform, for it results in a profound doubt of one’s own identity.”⁶² It is in this context that Fromm could echo the following, famous words from *Sickness*: “The greatest hazard of all, losing the self, can occur very quietly in the world, as if it were nothing at all. No other loss can occur so quietly; any other loss—an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc.—is sure to be noticed.”⁶³

Fromm returns to this theme in *The Nature of Man*, where he associates talk of “one” (as opposed to “I”) with “the world of gossip, of meaningless talk in which no one in particular is responsible for anything.”⁶⁴ And he explicitly connects this with Kierkegaard:

Kierkegaard had already seen that such an attitude can provide us with a sort of pleasure. Such is, in his words, the world of the “aesthetic man”; in other words, of the man who cannot find himself and wants to find his being in experiencing all things, thus losing his being and his identity. But this “experiencing” without beginning or end, which Kierkegaard symbolized in the attitude of the Don Juan, tends to create sadness, the “sadness of the hedonist,” so similar to the “suffering” described in the teaching of Buddha. This sadness consists in the absence of self. And sadness is, according to Kierkegaard, and to Spinoza, the most negative of our passions, the passion most clearly against the course of life.⁶⁵

We turn now to another topic crucial to both Fromm and Kierkegaard: love.

IV. Love

A comparative discussion of our two thinkers’ views on love could justifiably take up an entire book. In the space available here, I shall limit myself to a discussion of the following overlapping themes: love as active (the “works” of love); preferential and non-preferential forms of love; and the importance, in the context of loving others, of distinguishing “good” and “bad” forms of self-love. The two most important Fromm texts for our purposes here shall be *The Fear of Freedom* and, especially, *The Art of Loving*.

A. Love and its Works: The Brother and the Neighbor

For both thinkers, love must be manifested in its “works.” Hence Kierkegaard’s idea that love is “known only by its revealing fruits”⁶⁶ and Fromm’s insistence that the “art of loving” must be realized in *practice*⁶⁷ and that basic to this is “activity.”⁶⁸

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 219.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ SKS 11, 148 / SUD, 33.

⁶⁴ Erich Fromm, *The Nature of Man*, p. 16.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ SKS 9, 16 / WL, 8.

⁶⁷ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, chapter 4.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 100.

In *The Fear of Freedom* Fromm, following Freud, notes the centrality of both love and work to human life. Indeed, he presents “the spontaneity of love and productive work”⁶⁹ as the only alternative to the kind of dangerous, identity-threatening escape mechanism exemplified by “automaton conformity.” Love and productive work are the “foremost expressions” of the “spontaneous relationship to man and nature” that Fromm commends, “a relationship that connects the individual with the world without eliminating his individuality.”⁷⁰ Fromm stresses the “supreme role of love” in the Christian worldview, and castigates Calvin—one of the figures who comes in for the most flak in Fromm’s work⁷¹—for failing to recognize this, “in blatant contradiction to the New Testament.”⁷² Given the importance of love to Kierkegaard’s thought—not only in *Works of Love* but throughout the *corpus*—this is one place at which one might have hoped for a more detailed engagement with Kierkegaard on Fromm’s part. However, let us note some important links.

What is love, for Fromm? He denies that love is something “caused” by an object. Rather, it is “a lingering quality in a person which is only actualized by a certain ‘object.’”⁷³ (That is, the object actualizes what is already there in potentiality, rather than being its efficient cause.) Love is a “passionate affirmation” of such an object; “an active striving and inner relatedness, the aim of which is the happiness, growth, and freedom of its object.”⁷⁴ Interestingly, Fromm is suspicious of the Kierkegaardian idea that erotic love [*Elskov*] and friendship are “natural” (rooted in “drives and inclination”⁷⁵) whereas universal love (“brotherly” love is the term Fromm tends to use for neighbor-love) is beyond what is merely natural. Fromm further glosses this “lingering quality” as “a readiness which, in principle, can turn to any person and object including ourselves”⁷⁶: indeed, he claims that “exclusive love is a contradiction in itself.”⁷⁷ The romantic myth of only one other we can love encourages a kind of love which is “not love but a sado-masochistic attachment.”⁷⁸ Fromm asserts: “Love for one person implies love for man as such. Love for man as such is not...an abstraction coming ‘after’ the love for a specific person, or an enlargement of the experience with a specific ‘object’; it is its premise, although, genetically, it is acquired in the contact with concrete individuals.”⁷⁹ In other words, Fromm claims that brotherly love is the “most fundamental” type of love. On one level, this echoes Kierkegaard’s idea that many varieties of love can be traced to a common point of origin: “Just as the quiet lake originates deep down in hidden springs no eye has ever seen, so also does a person’s love originate more deeply in God’s love. If there were no gushing spring at the bottom, if God were not love, then there would be neither the little lake

⁶⁹ Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom*, p. 18.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁷¹ Both Luther and Calvin are described as being amongst the ranks of “the greatest haters” in history (*ibid.*, p. 82), but Fromm finds Calvin’s doctrine of predestination to be particularly repulsive. See especially *ibid.*, pp. 76-78, as well as the criticism of Calvin in *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, pp. 35-36.

⁷² Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom*, p. 76.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁷⁵ SKS 9, 51 / WL, 44.

⁷⁶ Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom*, p. 99.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

nor a human being's love."⁸⁰ Yet on another level—the matter of God being the ultimate source of this love—the two thinkers are in profound disagreement.

A further similarity, however, is that Fromm echoes the concerns about selfishness and neediness that run through Kierkegaard's discussion of erotic love and friendship as forms of—often disguised—self-love. Contrasting love at its purest with love of one's flesh and blood, an animal for its young, and the child for the parents on whom he is dependent, Fromm claims: "Only in the love of those who do not serve a purpose, love begins to unfold."⁸¹ But the conclusion that brotherly or neighbor-love is without purpose seems unwarranted. There are several such purposes that such love could serve. Clearly, if as Kierkegaard claims such love is a duty, then the "purpose" question is answered. But even outside such a view, one's sense of well-being or satisfaction may be served by acts or "works" of love. (Hence the fascinating but extremely complex question of the relationship between ostensibly "selfless" love and eudaimonism.⁸²) Further, as Ilham Dilman has pointed out, Fromm's claim that such fundamental love is pure because it is without purpose is inconsistent with his earlier claim, central to the book, that love is "the answer to the problem of human existence."⁸³

B. Self-Love

Both Fromm and Kierkegaard have interesting takes on self-love that draw our attention to what is either wrong or simplistic about the common tendency to equate self-love with selfishness. One of the claims for which *The Art of Loving* is best known is that one cannot properly love others until one loves oneself. This basic thought has become a banal cliché, but we shall see that what Fromm means by the idea, and the role it plays in his thought, is both more interesting and more subtle than a contemporary reader might expect.

In *The Fear of Freedom*, Fromm noted an apparent paradox arising from the historical account he gives there: that Protestantism, with its official focus on sacrifice and asceticism, actually gives rise to a system—modern capitalism—marked by "an extreme degree of egotism and by the pursuit of self-interest."⁸⁴ Modern capitalist man has become "a servant to ends which were not his,"⁸⁵ and yet subjectively believes himself to be motivated by his own self-interest. This paradox requires us to look closely at "the psychological intricacies of the problem of selfishness."⁸⁶ It is here that Fromm directs at Luther, Calvin, Kant and Freud a charge that has also (wrongly) been directed at Kierkegaard: that they assume selfishness and self-love to be one and the same.

⁸⁰ SKS 9, 18 / WL, 9-10.

⁸¹ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, p. 38.

⁸² And hence the exact meaning and import of Jesus' saying that "whosoever will save his life shall lose it, and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it" (Matthew 16:25).

⁸³ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, p. 6; Ilham Dilman, *Love: Its Forms, Dimensions and Paradoxes*, Basingstoke and New York: Macmillan 1998, p. 129.

⁸⁴ Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom*, p. 98.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

As noted above, for Fromm the self is as much a proper object of love as any other.⁸⁷ This has implications for “the affirmation of my own life, happiness, growth, freedom.”⁸⁸ If one possesses this “readiness,” one possesses it in relation to oneself: “if he can only ‘love’ others, he cannot love at all.”⁸⁹ It is from this basis that Fromm argues that self-love is something quite distinct from selfishness: indeed, he claims, selfishness is the very opposite of true self-love. For Fromm, selfishness is a kind of greediness, and greed is a “bottomless pit”⁹⁰ that can never be filled. The selfish person is consumed with a restless, never satisfied anxiety ultimately resulting from dissatisfaction with himself. Ditto the narcissist: according to Fromm, narcissism too is “an overcompensation for the basic lack of self-love.”⁹¹ Thus Freud is wrong when he claims that the narcissist has withdrawn love from others and directed it on to himself: according to Fromm, he loves neither others nor himself.⁹² It is for this reason that Fromm claims that “*Selfishness and self-love, far from being identical, are actually opposites.*”⁹³

Fromm claims that psychological observation simply does not support the thesis that love for oneself and love for others stand in contradiction to each other.⁹⁴ But he has a more basic logical point, which parallels Kierkegaard’s emphasis on the “as yourself” of the second love commandment. Fromm rejects Tillich’s suggestion that the term “self-love” would be better replaced by a phrase such as “natural self-affirmation” or “paradoxical self-acceptance” on two grounds. First, the term “self-love,” understood as a virtue rather than a vice,⁹⁵ very clearly expresses the idea that “love is an attitude which is the same toward all objects, including myself”;⁹⁶ “I am a human being too.”⁹⁷ Second, the term has a history rooted precisely in the second biblical love commandment and the subsequent tradition.⁹⁸ Fromm understands the commandment to imply that “respect for one’s own integrity and uniqueness, love for and understanding of one’s own self, cannot be separated from respect and love and understanding for another individual. The love for my own self is inseparably connected with the love for any other being.”⁹⁹ Ultimately, “an attitude of love towards themselves will be found in all those who are capable of loving others.”¹⁰⁰

So what of the original paradox? How can it be that modern man engages in behavior ultimately damaging to himself, while all the time believing that this is in his self-interest? Fromm’s answer is that modern man acts in the interests of the *social* self, “a self which is constituted by the role the individual is supposed to play and

⁸⁷ But can I have such an apparently generic relation to myself? On this question Kierkegaard, in such works as *Sickness*, is arguably more probing than Fromm.

⁸⁸ Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom*, p. 99.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, p. 47, emphasis in original.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45n.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

which in reality is merely the subjective disguise for the objective social function of man in society.”¹⁰¹ (Recall our discussion of “automaton conformity” and the links with *Sickness* above.) *Selfishness in the modern world constitutes feeding the social self at the expense of frustrating the real self.*¹⁰² This latter has been reduced to fragments—intellect and will power—to the exclusion of other parts of “the total personality.” The undeniable mastery of nature that modern man has achieved has been accompanied by his becoming “estranged from the product of his own hands.”¹⁰³ The world he has built—a world of factories, houses, mass-produced cars and clothes—has become his master;¹⁰⁴ he has become an instrument for the purposes of the “machine” he has built. “He keeps up the illusion of being the centre of the world, and yet he is pervaded by an intense sense of insignificance and powerlessness which his ancestors once consciously felt towards God.”¹⁰⁵ Thus, for Fromm, the general tenor of manipulation and instrumentality that pervades a society in which the laws of the market reign supreme applies also to the individual’s relation to himself. Man “sells himself and feels himself to be a commodity.”¹⁰⁶ This has profound impacts: a person’s self-confidence becomes dependent upon what others think of him—his perceived value in the marketplace—and his self-esteem is dependent upon his popularity.¹⁰⁷ All of which is a very long way from true self-love.

In returning to this theme in *The Art of Loving*, Fromm wants to show his reader “that all his attempts for love are bound to fail, unless he tries most actively to develop his total personality...; that satisfaction in individual love cannot be attained without the capacity to love one’s neighbour, without true humility, courage, faith and discipline.”¹⁰⁸

The centrality of “character” to Fromm’s thought, together with the idea that “maturity” is necessary to live well, leads to the thought that “the ability to love as an act of giving depends on the character development of the person.”¹⁰⁹ This alone suggests that there is a kind of self-love (in the form of self-care) necessary properly to love others. The key concepts in this “character development” as well as care (“the active concern for the life and growth of that which we love”¹¹⁰) are responsibility (a voluntary act that is a response “to the needs, expressed or unexpressed, of another human being”¹¹¹); respect (the non-exploitative concern that the other person “should grow and unfold as he is...for his own sake, and in his own ways, and not for the purpose of serving me”¹¹²); and knowledge (which includes the ability to see below the surface of the loved one, for example that her anger masks a deeper

¹⁰¹ Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom*, p. 101.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 103-104.

¹⁰⁸ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, p. vii.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

anxiety¹¹³). There are similarities with Kierkegaard, especially in *Works of Love*, in all of this.

Particularly worthy of note is Fromm's claim that respect for others is only possible if "I have achieved independence; if I can stand and walk without needing crutches, without having to dominate and exploit anyone else."¹¹⁴ Here, then, is one concrete sense in which I can only love others if I (properly) love myself: if I have found myself sufficiently worthy to be a project on which I have done substantial ethical work. In other words, Fromm enables us to see the possibility not only that there can be a kind of self-love that is *acceptable* (because it is non-selfish), but that there are aspects of proper self-love and self-care that may actually be *necessary* in order to love others. ("If an individual... can love *only* others, he cannot love at all."¹¹⁵)

Self-love is, of course, a key topic in *Works of Love*. As noted, Kierkegaard's valorization of non-preferential neighbor-love has often seen him accused of devaluing preferential love such as erotic love and friendship as merely "natural" or "pagan." I side with those numerous recent commentators (perhaps most prominent amongst them Jamie Ferreira) who have argued, against critics such as Adorno and Løgstrup,¹¹⁶ that Kierkegaard is not dismissing erotic love and friendship *per se*.¹¹⁷ But our focus here will be upon the claim that such preferential loves are actually disguised forms of self-love: "Just as self-love selfishly embraces this one and only *self* that makes it self-love, so also erotic love's passionate preference selfishly encircles this one and only beloved, and friendship's passionate preference encircles this one and only friend."¹¹⁸ (On this point, compare Fromm: "If a person loves only one other person and is indifferent to the rest of his fellow men, his love is not love but a symbiotic attachment, or an enlarged egotism."¹¹⁹) Combine Kierkegaard's association of erotic love and friendship with self-love, and a further tendency in the secondary literature to conflate self-love with selfishness,¹²⁰ and we get the worry that Kierkegaard is claiming erotic love and friendship to be necessarily selfish. If this were Kierkegaard's position, small wonder it meets with resistance.

Yet as Ferreira notes, Kierkegaard makes an important distinction between "proper [*rette*]"¹²¹ and "selfish"¹²² forms of self-love. Consequently, she argues, we should read his attacks on self-love as typically assuming that it is the latter he has in

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 23.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 22.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 47.

¹¹⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, "On Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love," *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, vol. 8, 1939-40, pp. 413-429; Knud Ejler Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, ed. by Hans Fink and Alasdair MacIntyre, trans. by Theodor I. Jensen and Gary Puckering, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1997.

¹¹⁷ M. Jamie Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving: a commentary on Kierkegaard's Works of Love*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001.

¹¹⁸ SKS 9 60 / WL 53.

¹¹⁹ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, p. 36.

¹²⁰ See for instance *Love's Grateful Striving*, especially p. 31 and Sylvia Walsh, *Living Christianly: Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Christian Existence*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press 2005, p. 79.

¹²¹ SKS 9, 20 / WL, 18.

¹²² SKS 9, 31, 60, 152 / WL, 23, 53, 151.

mind.¹²³ Critics are mistaken to suppose that Kierkegaard believes the self-love involved in preferential love is necessarily selfish. Ferreira puts the point thus: “It is entirely possible that I could enjoy a relationship based on preference without ever actually being selfish, as long as I would in principle be willing to let another be the source of my preferred one’s good if it were indeed better for my preferred one that this should happen.”¹²⁴ Selfishness in preferential love-relationships, on this view, seems to amount to either ignoring the good of the other, or devaluing it in relation to my own good.

Several important points arise in relation to this debate. A full discussion of them would take us beyond the scope of this article, but let me briefly touch upon three. First, we should acknowledge that in *Works of Love* Kierkegaard is not as clear as he might be about respecting his own distinction between self-love *per se* and selfish (or otherwise “bad”) self-love: he often uses the general term “self-love” to refer to the latter, more limited kind. Second, we have noted the tendency in the secondary literature to categorize this “bad” kind of self-love as “selfish.” But for much of what we want to object to, “selfishness” is the wrong term. It does not seem to capture many of the examples Kierkegaard himself uses of “bad” self-love. None of “the hustler” who “wastes his time and powers in the service of futile, inconsequential pursuits”; “the light-minded person” who “throws himself almost like a non-entity into the folly of the moment”; “the depressed person” who “desires to be rid of life, indeed, of himself”; or the person who “surrenders to despair”¹²⁵ seem well described by the term “selfish.” As I have argued elsewhere, an important distinction needs to be made between selfishness and other vices of self-focus, such as self-centeredness.¹²⁶ In short, selfishness is only one of a number of vices of self-focus that proper self-love would need to avoid. Third, Ferreira’s position above (and this is quite common amongst commentators) seems to be that I am being selfish unless I put the good of the other above my own good. But are there not circumstances in which this involves an inappropriate degree of self-sacrifice? One aspect of *Works of Love* that makes Kierkegaard’s position less extreme than, say, Anders Nygren¹²⁷ is the strength of his emphasis on the “as yourself” of the love commandment: each of us can say of ourselves that “I am a neighbour too.” We should be troubled by any account of self-love that effectively overlooks this. What we need to avoid is feeling—as arguably in Levinas—perpetually held hostage by the other. Recent feminist theology is a particularly enlightening source of the idea that there are forms of self-sacrifice so extreme that by valorising and following them, we fall into a variety of sin just as dangerous as that emanating from pride and self-aggrandizement.¹²⁸ And in

¹²³ M. Jamie Ferreira, “The problematic agapeistic ideal—again,” in Edward F. Mooney (ed.), *Ethics, Love and Faith in Kierkegaard*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 2008, p. 97.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

¹²⁵ *SKS* 9, 30-31 / *WL*, 23.

¹²⁶ John Lippitt, “True self-love and true self-sacrifice,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 66, 2009, pp. 125-138.

¹²⁷ Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip Watson, New York and Evanston: Harper and Row 1969 [1953].

¹²⁸ See for instance Valerie Saving Goldstein, “The human situation: a feminine view,” *Journal of Religion*, vol. 40, no. 2, 1960, pp. 100-112; Barbara Hilbert Andolsen, “Agape in feminist ethics,” in Lois K. Daly (ed.), *Feminist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox 1994, pp. 146-159; Erin Lothes Biviano, *The Paradox of Christian Sacrifice: The Loss of Self, the Gift of Self*, New York: Crossroad 2007.

so doing, we fail to see, as Richard Kearney memorably puts it, that “not every other is innocent and not every self is an egoistic emperor.”¹²⁹

With regard to the second point above, Fromm illustrates in two particularly memorable ways the importance of distinguishing between selfishness and self-centredness. In *The Art of Loving*, he discusses “neurotic ‘unselfishness’”:

a symptom of neurosis observed in not a few people who usually are troubled not by this symptom, but by others connected with it, such as depression, tiredness, inability to work, failure in love relationships, and so on. Not only is unselfishness not felt as a “symptom”; it is often the one redeeming character trait on which such people pride themselves. The “unselfish” person “does not want anything for himself”; he “lives only for others,” is proud that he does not consider himself important. He is puzzled to find that in spite of his unselfishness he is unhappy, and that his relationships to those close to him are unsatisfactory. Analytic work shows that his unselfishness is not something apart from his other symptoms but one of them, in fact often the most important one; that he is paralysed in his capacity to love or enjoy anything; that he is pervaded by his hostility towards life and that *behind the facade of unselfishness a subtle but not less intense self-centredness is hidden*. This person can be cured only if his unselfishness too is interpreted as a symptom along with the others, so that his lack of productiveness, which is at the root of both his unselfishness *and* his other troubles, can be corrected.¹³⁰

The effect of such “unselfishness” on others is damaging, particularly in such a mother on her children. Fromm claims that the children are adversely affected by the mother’s “hidden hostility towards life...and eventually they become imbued with it themselves”:¹³¹ precisely the opposite of the mother’s intentions.

Conversely—and this is the second illustration—surely the most extreme form of self-centredness is narcissism. Fromm describes overcoming one’s narcissism as “the main condition for the achievement of love.”¹³² Further, “The narcissistic orientation is one in which one experiences as real only that which exists within oneself, while the phenomena in the outside world have no reality in themselves, but are experienced only from the viewpoint of being useful or dangerous to one.”¹³³ Narcissism’s opposite, the desirable pole, is what Fromm calls “objectivity,” though what he means is not that variety of objectivity to which Climacus takes exception, but simply “the faculty to see people and things *as they are*,”¹³⁴ rather than as distorted by one’s own desires and fears. This gloss nicely echoes what Kierkegaard means when he talks about our duty to love the actual people that we see,¹³⁵ rather than reducing the other to the same (as Levinas would put it). In Kierkegaard’s words, the concern is as follows: “*in loving the actual individual person it is important that one does not substitute an imaginary idea of how we think or could wish that this person should be*. The one who does this does not love the person he sees but again some-

¹²⁹ Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, London and New York: Routledge 2003, p. 67.

¹³⁰ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, p. 48, first emphasis mine.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 92.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ SKS 9, 155-174 / WL, 154-174.

thing unseen, his own idea or something similar.”¹³⁶ But it is also important to note that Fromm connects his discussion of overcoming narcissism with an emphasis, echoing Kierkegaard, on the need to get beyond only preferential love: “I cannot be truly objective about my family if I cannot be objective about the stranger, and vice versa.”¹³⁷

Such non-preferential love, argues Fromm, requires objectivity (in the above sense), reason (the faculty to think objectively) and humility (the emotional attitude behind it). But all these—indeed the practice of the art of loving as a whole—are dependent upon the practice of what Fromm calls “rational faith.”¹³⁸ He defines this as “not primarily belief in something, but the quality of certainty and firmness which our convictions have...a character trait pervading the whole personality.”¹³⁹ As a humanist, Fromm’s conception of faith obviously lacks the transcendental dimension of Kierkegaardian faith (see section V below), but for our purposes here, note that one important dimension of faith for Fromm is faith in an enduring self, and this faith in ourselves is for him an important dimension of self-love. Moreover, in parallel to love, “Only the person who has faith in himself is able to be faithful to others.”¹⁴⁰ Readers of Kierkegaard will be well aware of the parallels between faith and love that run throughout his work, so it is interesting in this respect to note that one of the culminating ideas of *The Art of Loving* is that love is an act of faith, and that “whoever is of little faith is also of little love.”¹⁴¹ The Kierkegaardian idea of faith as trusting risk—think of Climacus’ 70,000 fathoms—is also present in Fromm’s idea, present as a theme that frames *The Art of Loving*, that whereas most people’s conscious fear is of not being loved, “*the real, though usually unconscious fear is that of loving. To love means to commit oneself without guarantee, to give oneself completely in the hope that our love will produce love in the loved person.*”¹⁴² It is in this sense, for Fromm, that love is an act of faith.

C. A Coda on Erotic Love

Alongside this goes a skepticism about the dangers of “erotic love” (“the craving for complete fusion, for union with one other person”¹⁴³) that is in some sense more extreme than Kierkegaard’s. After all, Kierkegaard does describe erotic love as “undeniably life’s most beautiful happiness.”¹⁴⁴ Fromm describes it as “perhaps the most deceptive form of love there is,”¹⁴⁵ in large part because the experience of such love is often confused with a naively romantic notion of “falling in love.” But as Fromm notes: “After the stranger has become an intimately known person there are no more barriers to be overcome.”¹⁴⁶ It is hard not to be reminded of Johannes the Seducer here. And Fromm is more explicit than Kierkegaard about the potentially misleading nature of sexual desire. Noting the association of love with sexual desire in the

¹³⁶ SKS 9, 162 / WL, 164, emphasis in original.

¹³⁷ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, p. 94.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁴⁴ SKS 9, 266 / WL, 267.

¹⁴⁵ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, p. 43.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

minds of most people, Fromm claims that they “are easily misled to conclude that they love each other when they want each other physically.”¹⁴⁷ The following related thought seems decidedly Kierkegaardian: “If the desire for physical union is not stimulated by love, if erotic love is not also brotherly love, it never leads to union in more than an orgiastic, transitory sense.”¹⁴⁸ Here we might recall the Seducer’s last diary entry, expressing as it does something close to contempt for the object of his seductive project:

now it is finished, and I never want to see her again. Once a girl has given away everything, she is weak, she has lost everything....I do not want to be reminded of my relationship with her; she has lost her fragrance...nothing is more revolting than the feminine tears and pleas that alter everything and yet are essentially meaningless. I did love her, but from now on she can no longer occupy my soul.¹⁴⁹

Similarly, Fromm claims that the supposed union is nothing but an illusion: “without love this ‘union’ leaves strangers as far apart as they were before—sometimes it makes them ashamed of each other, because when the illusion has gone they feel their estrangement even more markedly than before.”¹⁵⁰ In contrast to Freud, for whom tenderness was a sublimation of the sexual instinct, Fromm claims, “it is the direct outcome of brotherly love, and exists in physical as well as in non-physical forms of love.”¹⁵¹

Fromm’s discussion of exclusiveness in erotic love also warrants mention, as it provides a possible gloss on what the controversial claim in *Works of Love* that the lover is “first and foremost the neighbour” might amount to. Fromm claims that exclusiveness, while often “possessive attachment,” the kind of combined egoism which so troubles Kierkegaard, in which a couple simply “solve the problem of separateness by enlarging the single individual into two”¹⁵²—does not *have* to mean that. Here is his alternative: “Erotic love is exclusive, but it loves in the other person all of mankind, all that is alive. It is exclusive only in the sense that I can fuse myself fully and intensely with one person only. Erotic love excludes the love for others only in the sense of erotic fusion, full commitment in all aspects of life—but not in the sense of deep brotherly love.”¹⁵³

Fromm adds another concern to Kierkegaard’s worries about erotic love as preferential: the problems arising from capitalism. Since our whole culture is based upon “the idea of a mutually favourable exchange,”¹⁵⁴ this economic model is imported into romantic relationships. People look for a “good deal” in the relationships market, seeking out such commodities in a partner—toughness, sexiness, ambition, tolerance—as may be valued by the fashions of their society. “Two persons thus fall in love when they feel that they have found the best object available on the market, considering the limitations of their own exchange values. Often, as in buying real es-

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 43.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ SKS 2, 432 / EO I, 445.

¹⁵⁰ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, p. 43.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 2.

tate, the hidden potentialities which can be developed play a considerable role in this bargain.”¹⁵⁵ This element is not so loud in Kierkegaard, though we might recall *Fear and Trembling's* “frogs in life’s swamp”—and the contempt in which the young lad holds them.¹⁵⁶

V. Fromm and Kierkegaard: Some Key Differences

For all the points of contact between them, there are perhaps two major themes that divide Fromm and Kierkegaard on the matters here discussed. First, Fromm is far more centrally concerned with historical factors and underlying social structures than is Kierkegaard.¹⁵⁷ Second, and more obviously, their views of religion are very different. In closing, let us consider each in turn.

Fromm’s account of modern freedom grows out of an account of the collapse of the assumptions of the medieval world and the growth of Lutheranism and Calvinism. In this sense, his worldview has a significant overlap with that of Max Weber.¹⁵⁸ And whereas *Works of Love* seems to be addressing the individual reader, Fromm sees major social changes as necessary before genuine love can be more commonplace. He roots the problem of “aloneness” in capitalist society, and key ideas—such as the view of the self as a commodity to be packaged for others’ approval—stem from this perspective. At the end of *The Art of Loving*, he insists: “Those who are seriously concerned with love as the only rational answer to the problem of human existence must, then, arrive at the conclusion that important and radical changes in our social structure are necessary, if love is to become a social and not a highly individualistic, marginal phenomenon.”¹⁵⁹

As to religion, while descended from a long line of rabbis and fascinated in religious questions—his doctoral dissertation was on the social psychological function of the law in the community life of diaspora Jews—Fromm’s views on religion are often excessively sweeping and somewhat dismissive. In *The Fear of Freedom*, religion seems to be treated as of at best instrumental value when Fromm lists it amongst those things (nationalism being another) that are “refuges from what man dreads most: isolation.”¹⁶⁰ One is reminded here of Freud’s reductionist view of religion as psychological consolation.¹⁶¹ The section on “love of God” in *The Art of Loving* involves a very broad-brush account of matriarchal and patriarchal; eastern and western, forms of religion in which the influence of Freud still seems too prevalent. In effectively ranking religions in a hierarchy, Fromm indulges, like his erstwhile mentor,

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁵⁶ SKS 4, 136 / FT, 41.

¹⁵⁷ Recall his comparison of Marx and Kierkegaard in section II.

¹⁵⁸ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, London: Routledge 2001 [1930]. Though for Fromm’s attempt to distinguish his position from Weber’s, see *The Fear of Freedom*, p. 254.

¹⁵⁹ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, p. 103. Fromm develops this theme in more detail in *The Sane Society*.

¹⁶⁰ Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom*, p. 16.

¹⁶¹ See Sigmund Freud *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vols. 1-24, ed. and trans. by James Strachey, London: Hogarth Press 1953-74, especially “Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices” (in vol. 9, 1907); *Totem and Taboo* (in vol. 13, 1913); *The Future of an Illusion* (in vol. 21, 1927); *Civilization and its Discontents* (in vol. 21, 1930) and *Moses and Monotheism* (in vol. 23, 1939).

in a high degree of psychological over-generalization. Moreover, consider this summary of his view of freedom: “Positive freedom...implies the principle that there is no higher power than this unique individual self, that man is the centre and purpose of his life; that the growth and realization of man’s individuality is an end that can never be subordinated to purposes which are supposed to have greater dignity.”¹⁶² Hardly a view that Kierkegaard, with his resolute emphasis on our creatureliness and radical dependence upon God, could accept. While in *Psychoanalysis and Religion* Fromm recognizes the importance of religion—“there is no one without a religious need, a need to have a frame of orientation and an object of devotion”¹⁶³—he relies upon a distinction between “authoritarian” and “humanistic” religion that has been much criticized as excessively simplistic.¹⁶⁴ Authoritarian religion involves “recognition on the part of man of some higher unseen power as having control of his destiny, and as being entitled to obedience, reverence, and worship.”¹⁶⁵ The essence of such a view, for Fromm, is “despising everything in oneself.”¹⁶⁶ By contrast, “humanistic” religion is “centred around man and his strength.”¹⁶⁷ In theistic forms of such religion, God is “a symbol of *man’s own powers*.”¹⁶⁸ Fromm includes the teachings of Jesus here,¹⁶⁹ though his justification for doing so is rather thin.¹⁷⁰ In his discussion of dependence, Fromm says:

[I]t is one thing to recognise one’s dependence and limitations, and it is something entirely different to indulge in this dependence, to worship the forces on which one depends. To understand realistically and soberly how limited is our power is an essential part of wisdom and maturity; to worship it is masochistic and self-destructive. The one is humility, the other self-humiliation.¹⁷¹

But there is more assertion than argument in Fromm’s claim that worship is necessarily masochistic. James W. Jones suggests that we need the distinction between “submission” and “surrender” argued for by Emmanuel Ghent.¹⁷² What Fromm describes above counts as the former, but “surrender...involves the choice to give oneself over to a powerful aesthetic, romantic, or spiritual experience” and as such “is an essential aspect of any transforming experience.”¹⁷³ The inability to do so “might itself be regarded as psychologically problematic.”¹⁷⁴

To be fair to Fromm, we should acknowledge that some of Kierkegaard’s more extreme claims in valorizing self-denial do seem to fall foul of a problem

¹⁶² Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom*, p. 228.

¹⁶³ Erich Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, p. 25.

¹⁶⁴ To be fair to Fromm, he does say that this is “only one distinction”—but nevertheless “one which in my opinion is the most important” (*Psychoanalysis and Religion*, p. 34).

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 36. Calvin in particular once again comes in for particular criticism here.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹⁷² Emmanuel Ghent, “Masochism, submission and surrender,” *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, vol. 24, 1990, pp. 108-136; cited in *Terror and Transformation*, p. 67.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

Fromm might help us to diagnose.¹⁷⁵ Ultimately, though, Anti-Climacus' essentially Augustinian focus on "resting transparently in the power that created" us betokens a very different view of our dependence to that of Fromm. And for all his praise for certain varieties of religion and the interesting points of contact between our two thinkers, it seems likely that Kierkegaard would suspect that ultimately there is a God-shaped hole in Fromm's thought.

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¹⁷⁵ Consider for instance the claims that to be truly Christian, self-denial must involve rejection by "the world": "all denial that finds support in the world is not Christian self-denial" (SKS 9, 195 / WL, 196). In places, Kierkegaard seems to come dangerously close to valorising self-denial purely for its own sake, a view that might not unreasonably be charged with spiritual masochism. For more on this, see John Lippitt, " 'I love me; I love me not': Frankfurt, Kierkegaard, self-love and self-denial," in *Living Reasonably, Loving Well: Conversing with Frankfurt and Kierkegaard*, ed. by Myron Penner and Søren Landkildehus, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, forthcoming.