



The Transference in the Humanist Perspective of Erich Fromm

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Fromm states (1979 p. 38):

“Another crucial concept in Freud's system is that of transference first observed it in the Case of Anna O. (Breuer and Freud 1893, and Freud 1910). This concept was the result of the clinical observation that analysands develop a strong tie to the person of the analyst during the treatment. This tie could of times be love, admiration, attachment and, at others, a blending of hate, opposition and aggression”.

“What makes this transference particularly interesting is that it grows out of the therapeutic situation rather than out of the qualities of the analyst. He came to the conclusion that the analysand in the analytic process developed many feelings which he or she had as a child toward one of the parents. In other words, the feelings toward the analyst were 'transferred' from the original object to the person of the analyst. Until Freud, nobody had cared to investigate the affective attitude of a patient toward the physician. Usually, the physicians accepted with satisfaction that the patients 'adored' them, and, if the patients did not, then the physician often disliked them for not being 'good patients'”. (Fromm: op. cit. p. 38f).

Of course Freud framed all of this in the universalization of the Oedipus Complex, his ideas of women as castrated males with “penis envy”, etc.

Within the theoretical humanistic framework of Fromm, where the human nuclear con-

flict is his fear of aloneness, often lived as a *ceasing to be, as not being*.

"The transference phenomenon, namely the voluntary dependence of a person on another person in authority, because he/she *feels helpless*, in need of a leader, of a strong authority and is ready to submit to this authority, is one of the most important phenomena in social life, quite beyond the individual family and the analytic situation. Anybody who is willing to see can discover the tremendous role that *transference plays socially, politically and in religious life*. One has only to look at the faces in a crowd that applauds a charismatic leader like Hitler or De Gaulle, and one sees the same expression of blind awe, adoration, affection, something in fact which transforms the face from its humdrum daily expression into that of a passionate believer. As in the psychoanalytic transference, this has almost nothing to do with the real human qualities of the admired person.

“The transference in the analytic situation and the worship of leaders in adult life are not different: *they have their basis in the sense of helplessness and powerlessness of the child which leads to its dependence on the parents...* What is often overlooked, however, is the fact that the adult (can be) helpless too”. One must repeat: “*The social transference born out of the same sense of helplessness as the psychoanalytic transference is one of the most important social phenomena...* A society whose members are helpless needs idols”. (Fromm: op. cit. pp.



41ff. - Emphasis added).

In order to understand how the transference is analysed, we must devote a little time to describe briefly, the normal and pathological development of human beings. We must begin by pointing to an apodictic fact: the object of life is to live, despite the fact that quite often it seems as if humans are set on destroying it. Since life appeared on this planet, it has developed in the most diverse forms and it is quite possible that evolution has not yet come to an end. We cannot begin to imagine what the pool of life will do confronted by so many contaminants, but it is probable that the necessary mutants will appear so that life can continue. Perhaps this thought comes because it is rather inconceivable that this Earth should become completely dead.

“The neonate emerges as an organism whose responsiveness is centered on and geared to a perceptual-motor-effective dialogue with the mother” or the mothering person. “The focus of their gaze is most accurate for objects about eight inches away—the exact distance from the mother’s eyes when an infant is held in the normal breast or bottle-feeding position”. (Lichtenberg 1983). This position during feeding is indispensable not only for the primary need of feeding, but also, importantly, as a stimulus for the ulterior development of their affective area; so much so, that this affective area does not develop in congenital esophageal atresia that impedes normal breast feeding. In the case of known adults, that suffered this atresia, they are cold and distant persons. But, if the newborn is breastfed despite the fact that it regurgitates on the nurturing breast, because the mother overcomes her understandable repugnance and frustration, the neonate develops its affective area like anyone else.

Winnicott (1965) coined the apt concept of the “facilitating environment” that expresses the need that for the best adaptation and development of the infant, the transit from the stable intrauterine condition to the unstable extrauterine one be as suave and gradual as possible. Unfortunately, the “facilitating environment” is not the usual occurrence: what is frequent is to emerge into a conflictful family milieu concomitant with our alienated society, in which the

concept of love, so well described by Fromm in *The art of loving* (1956), is a mere ideology without its necessary affective component.

Fromm’s (1956) and Bowlby’s (1958) ideas dovetail neatly; Fromm’s from his perspective of the dual role of mother-love: on the one hand, she must love and protect and feel an at-oneness with the child; and, on the other hand, she must help the child to become gradually independent of her, as it’s motor and psychic strength permit this. Bowlby presents his idea from the point of view of the child, who has a need for attachment, to feel protected and cared-for and has his other need of autonomy. But Bowlby here does not speak of love, a love that for Fromm implies care, knowledge, interest and responsibility and thus it also implies a spontaneous-warm-loving-mother-child relationship that precludes possessiveness, overprotectiveness and rejection.

Since the aim of life is to live, *the newborn must adapt, if he is to survive*, to the conditions of his family environment be it a facilitating environment, a marked sado-masochistic one, a very traumatizing one where he is rejected, not loved, or one of scarcity and hunger.

The child’s character orientation with its positive and negative aspects is structured during its growing-up process, and at the same time they conform their frame of orientation and devotion (Fromm 1955 pp. 63-66). At variance with the character orientation that can only change its negative aspects into positive ones, or *vice versa*; the frame of orientation and devotion can undergo rather radical—not to say total—changes, for it can be modified by all learning processes, by all new knowledge acquired and by our capacity to objectify. This frame is indispensable to find our place, to explain, to give meaning and make sense of this fast changing world where the unexpected, the frightening or tragic events are commonplace. It does not matter if our frame of orientation and devotion is illusory or false, as when we thought that the Earth was the center of our planetary system; and despite this, we could still predict the eclipses of the Sun, the Moon, and of Venus.

We have stated that the child *has to accept as normal, if it is to survive*, all that takes place in his environment and consequently the infant



must rationalize what is neither objective nor true, thus integrating the deformations of reality presented to her or him. They assume thus (only to mention a few examples), that “normal” human interactions are sado-masochistic; they learn “machismo” and propagate the not so infrequent violent relationships between husband and wife; man's fear of women is an habitual experience since infancy, as is the fear of warmth, tenderness, love and friendship. Authoritarian ethics (Fromm 1947 pp. 8-12), amongst other experiences, teach that obedience is *the virtue par excellence* and that the greatest sin is to disobey (Fromm 1981): thus, a *good* child is one who submits to his parents, and a *bad* child is one who becomes psychologically independent from them. The prohibition to disobey leads to passivity and submissiveness, all too frequently abject; as it leads to the absence or the severe limitation of the capacity to form rational judgment.

“This becomes very clear if we study the function of *rationalization*. However unreasonable or immoral an action may be, man has an insuperable urge to rationalize it, that is, to prove to himself and to others that his action is determined by reason, common sense, or at least conventional morality. He has little difficulty in acting irrationally, but it is almost impossible for him not to give his actions the appearance of reasonable motivations”. (Fromm 1955 p. 65).

We must be aware that rationalizations work both ways: on the one hand they are the result of repressions, and, on the other, they aid and abet repression, as substitutes for rational and objective thought processes.

During psychoanalysis, the analysand learns to de-repress, to clarify, to confront, and to demythify the numerous rationalizations he held in order to survive. Also, the analysand is able to clarify and change irrational facets of his frame of orientation and devotion in the *HERE* and *NOW*, for we tend to carry the past into the present, as related in the following Zen story:

“Tanzan and Ekido were once traveling together down a muddy road. A heavy rain was still falling.

“Coming around a bend, they met a lovely girl in a silk kimono and sash, unable to cross the intersection.

“Come on, girl”, said Tanzan, at once lifting her in his arms and he carried her over the mud.

“Ekido did not speak again until that night when they reached a lodging temple. Then he could no longer restrain himself. ‘We monks don't go near females’, he told Tanzan, ‘especially not young and lovely ones. It is dangerous. Why did you do that?’

“I left the girl there” said Tanzan. ‘Are you still carrying her?’” (Zenzaki and Reps: 1957 p. 33f).

We are like Ekido, and we continue to carry our particular “geisha”. As psychoanalysts, we do not need to know many biographical data at the beginning. In due course, we want to know how many members were there in his family of origin; the place our analysand holds and the socio-economic background of his family. This latter in order to know something about their social character. We ask for three childhood memories, in a free choice, to see the present day perspective of the family of our subject. We request that they relate an average week day and a Sunday (day of rest) from the hour they get up till bed time, and repetitive dreams. We listen to what they say and most significantly, to what they do not say. For the rest, with patience, the past pertinent data will emerge, ratifying or rectifying our work hypothesis. (Fromm: Personal Communication).

In the dyad, where at each session analysand and analyst confront each other face-to-face with nothing in between for the therapist to hide behind, slowly, in the dialogue, the analysand's frame of orientation and devotion is tested, corrected, clarified, and objectified by him, and the transference, as the frame changes, is thus also slowly transcended. We have stated that in order to avoid ostracism and the fear of abandonment the distortions of the frame of orientation and devotion are learned in the family and within the social group or subgroup. The sense of psychological impotence, moral cowardliness, the lack of aliveness, hatreds, etc., are all quite frequently repressed. These distortions



constitute the basis of the transference material, like the geisha we continue to carry and have not left behind after lifting her over the mud. As we leave her in the past, we are free to choose our own goals and we can only leave her in the past, when we have experiences and lived through our ghostly fears of aloneness and the fear of freedom *for*, and when we can assume the risks and responsibilities of our decisions *without rationalizations*.

Any brusque change of the frame of orientation and devotion can produce reactive depressions or psychotic episodes of diverse severity, as in instances of transculturation shocks which have happened to immigrants, political refugees, “wet-backs”, foreign students, etc. The finding of familiar foods, music, news, congenial groups and so on, may help adjust to the new environment or impede this adjustment, for if the past frame is reorganized; this has often happened to immigrant ethnic groups.

Many prejudices, like racism, elitism, sexism (Edwards et al: 1972 pp. 25-27) that form part of the irrational social component of the frame of orientation and devotion are transmitted from parents to children thoughtlessly. The doors to corruption, to facile enrichment regardless of the means; to lying, cheating, to cant and cinisism have been opened when we privilege money and “social prestige”.

Individual and social transference can be transcended, within or outside the psychoanalytic dyad, de-repressing, clarifying, demythifying and objectifying reality. This transcendence can occur in the psychoanalyst and in the parents, as well as it can change the social mores, local and universal. After all, our world is becoming smaller changes can affect all of us;

nothing is now far away.

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