

A Profile of Erich Fromm

Daniel Burston

Erich Pinchas Fromm was born on 23 March 1900 in Frankfurt am Main and died on 18 March 1980 in Locarno, Switzerland. By his own account he was the only offspring of a troubled marriage. In keeping with his name – *fromm* means pious – young Erich received an intensive Jewish religious education and continued to observe the rituals of his faith until the age of twenty-six. Fromm's religious preceptors espoused ideas gleaned from philosophy, mysticism, socialism and psychoanalysis along with traditional rabbinic wisdom. They evidently had a decisive influence in molding Fromm's character and convictions. This seems to bear out Fromm's assertion (contra Freud) that character is not something that is crystallized before puberty, or patterned by family influences alone. According to Fromm, character can change throughout life and prevailing social character has a profound impact on the developing individual, irrespective of their family's idiosyncracies or misfortunes. This was certainly true in Fromm's case in which the typically Jewish synthesis of rationalism and mysticism and love of tradition, combined with a prophetic element of radical protest. These seemingly contradictory tendencies existed in Fromm's character in about the same proportion as they existed in his cultural surroundings and constituted the creative matrix from which his thought emerged.

While still in the midst of religious studies, Fromm received his doctorate in sociology at Heidelberg at the age of twenty-two with a dissertation on the role and

function of halachic law in three Jewish religious communities: the Karaites, Hassidim, and Reform Jewry. Fromm's formal analytic training commenced with a year's study in Munich under Wilhelm Wittenberg when he was twenty-five. This was followed by another year of study under Karl Landauer in Frankfurt. Fromm finished his training with two more years under Hanns Sachs and Theodor Reik in Berlin.

In the late 1920s, Fromm was instrumental in organizing the Frankfurt Psychoanalytic Institute and as a result of these efforts he came in contact with the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research composed of a group of creative scholars and social scientists with Marxist leanings. Because of his background in sociology and clinical work, Fromm was soon appointed head of the Institute's section on social psychology. He held this position until 1938, when he parted angrily from his former associates who, like himself, had relocated in New York to escape the Nazi menace. Fromm went on to achieve fame and fortune with his work *Escape from Freedom* (1941) and many other best-sellers, but the lingering bitterness between him and his erstwhile colleagues of the Frankfurt School, resulted in fierce polemical exchanges in the years that followed.

Although Fromm received his analytic training from staunch Freud loyalists, his real sympathies lay with Freud's loyal opposition, or those independent analysts who tried to reconcile their intellectual loyalty



to Freud with other influences and ideas and still remain within the organizational framework of the analytic mainstream. When Fromm began writing in the 1930s, Freud's loyal opposition could be neatly divided into two camps: Marxists and non-Marxists. The non-Marxists were somewhat dispersed geographically and were such striking individualists that one hesitates to characterize them as a group. Their number included analysts such as Ludwig Binswanger, Georg Groddeck, Sandor Ferenczi, Karen Horney, Paul Schilder, and others.

The left-leaning analysts included Wilhelm Reich and his associates, the various participants in Otto Fenichel's celebrated *Kinderseminar*, and of course, Erich Fromm. During the late 1920s and early 1930s, their cultural center of gravity was Berlin. Despite their strong intellectual similarities, characterizing Freud's left opposition in the 1930s as a group is also somewhat problematic, because, despite various collaborative efforts that appeared to succeed temporarily, they ultimately fought among themselves and expressed their differences with a cold and furious pedantry rooted as much in left-wing sectarianism as in the jealous, fratricidal atmosphere Freud cultivated among his less independent followers.

Although Fromm supported Reich for a brief period when he was in his twenties, the relationship soon soured and, as far as is known, he never developed close affectional ties with any other left-wing analysts or their families. He did remain on excellent terms with Georg Groddeck, Sandor Ferenczi, and Karen Horney, three creative intellects who suffered public and private abuse for their theoretical differences from Freud's more zealous followers. Witnessing the vicious and demeaning things said to and about these people, whom he admired and respected, Fromm acquired a visceral distaste for the seamy, authoritarian side of psychoanalytic politics which he subsequently expressed in his writings with rare candor.

Though studiously neglected by the analytic mainstream, Fromm emerged from the turbulent thirties and forties to become one of the most popular and prolific psychoanalytic authors of the twentieth century. As any intellectual historian will attest, his impact and relevance to the humanities and social sciences in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s is second to none. This inference is abundantly borne out by the number of times he was being cited in scholarly journal articles: Only Erik Erikson, who stayed close to ego-psychology and the analytic mainstream, achieved comparable stature among non-clinicians. Fromm's book *Man for Himself*, published in 1947, occupies an interesting place

in the trajectory of Fromm's thought. To begin with, Marx's influence, which was so prominent in the 1930s and which resurfaced again in the late 1950s and 1960s, is scarcely in evidence here. Cold War tensions, McCarthyism and its threat of political persecution may have had something to do with this. Another salient factor of this book is that Fromm was apparently attempting to revive and incorporate philosophical leanings and interests from his late adolescence and early adulthood antedating his immersion in Marxism and psychoanalysis.

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Nowhere is Fromm's revival of older intellectual loyalties more in evidence than in connection with his psychology of ethics, which is best approached by way of contrast with Freud's writings in this area. Freud's persistent attempts to unmask the irrational or libidinous striving behind ethical and religious precepts prompted Paul Ricoeur to describe his interpretive strategy for these domains of human experience as a "hermeneutics of suspicion." The same could, of course, be said of Marx, for whom class interest was of paramount importance. Though it is seldom remarked upon remembered by the educated public, the fact remains that in 1932, Fromm commended psychoanalysis to Marxists for its ability to reduce the loftiest ethical ideals "to their earthly, libidinal nucleus," disclosing thereby the covert political objectives behind the methodical manipulation of the masses's infantile attachment to their rulers. In short, the notion that ethical ideals are often smokescreens for hidden agendas, rather than true ends in themselves, or even real entities *per se* – an argument articulated by Max Stirner and Friedrich Nietzsche, as well as Marx and Freud – seemed quite congenial to Fromm at the time.

Although he later insisted that he never intended to deny the reality or importance of ethical ideas, Fromm used a similar unmasking technique to expose the ideological underpinnings of the idea of analytic neutrality, albeit in the name of a more humane and liberating set of values. Whatever he may have thought or felt at the time, by 1947 he strenuously insisted that ethical ideals are not always, or inevitably, ideological subterfuges or elaborate self-deceptions. On some level, ethical ideals represent answers to the problem



of human existence and our innermost nature demands that we become ethical beings to preserve our relation to Being as well as for the sake of our sanity and personal integrity.

In fairness to Fromm, this apparent about-face was probably just a dramatic change in emphasis and not a change in his fundamental position, as many critics allege. After all, it is perfectly logical to suppose that while many lofty moral injunctions disguise base objectives or lend themselves to hypocritical use, not all of them do, or are intended that way. This point is important to bear in mind, because a dizzying number of new variants on the old hermeneutics of suspicion, bearing the names of Lacan, Althusser, Foucault, Derrida, Baudrillard, and other Parisian intellectuals, have inundated academia of late, and only recently have they begun to wane and to show their intellectual poverty plainly.

Many lofty moral injunctions disguise base objectives and hypocrisy.

Despite the eloquence and breathtaking coherence that the hermeneutics of suspicion sometimes seem to impart to their subject matter, their chief weakness lies in a sweeping, totalistic, and ultimately nay-saying manner. Besides, the insistence on dispensing with sham and self-deception, that Marx, Stimer, Nietzsche and Freud all shared, expresses an implicit value system, one that predicates the possibility of emancipation on the ability to relinquish illusions; and puts a positive value on the ability to think critically against the mainstream. Or are the pursuits of honesty and emancipation not the expressions of ethical values? And if so, what are they?

Unfortunately, considerations like these were utterly lost on Fromm's critics. After the appearance of *Man for Himself*, he was frequently condemned as a simple-minded moralist, or a glibly utopian Pollyanna. These charges came from all parts of the political spectrum, although some of the most strident denunciations came from left-wing philosopher Herbert Marcuse, formerly of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. None of this affected Fromm's popularity, but his failure to embrace the hermeneutics of suspicion unreservedly made him anathema to the guardians of orthodoxy in Marxist and psychoanalytic circles and turned a significant number of intellectuals away from him. This, in turn, contributed to current neglect of him

in academe. One does not have to be uncritical of Fromm's work to realize that most of these criticisms were unfair and rooted in ignorance of the deeper implications and fundamentals of this thought.

Man for Himself is a remarkable book. It is both passionate and theoretical, yet cogent and accessible, and though lacking in empirical or experimental data, it is infused with a lively and expansive erudition in literature, philosophy, and the social sciences that is all too rare in most contemporary reflections on psychology and ethics. Fromm distances himself from his Freudian beginnings, even further than in *Escape from Freedom*, and openly takes his bearings from a philosophical tradition that antedates Freud. A multitude of thinkers, including Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, the Stoics, St. Augustine, Calvin, Hobbes, Rousseau, Grotius, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, Bentham, Nietzsche, and Dewey, put in noteworthy appearances, while references to Hegel, Dilthey, Bergson, Brentano, Husserl, Heidegger, Scheler, and Sartre, among others, grace the footnotes. While some might regard this as cause for celebration – or a modicum of grudging respect, at least – professional philosophers have often used Fromm's eclectic borrowings from philosophy as a pretext to dismiss him altogether and to ignore the lucidity and integrity of his reading and response to Freud. Among Freudian zealots Fromm's reliance on pre-Freudian source has occasioned the charge that his revisionist reflections on analytic theory are merely a reversion to a pre-Freudian psychology of consciousness and is, therefore, lacking in a realistic appreciation of the depth and irrationality of unconscious mental processes and the importance of sexuality and early childhood experiences.

On close inspection, these charges prove to be unfounded or at least greatly exaggerated, requiring detailed qualification in lieu of a simple rebuttal. In the philosophical dimension, *Man for Himself* provides us with a searching critique of the limitations and abuses of the ethical relativism espoused by many Freudians, according to which all ethical and normative ideals are no more than the conscious expression of unconscious needs and tendencies. The emphasis on the alleged relativity of ethical values in the analytic mainstream was rooted originally in a hermeneutics of suspicion that was closer to the spirit of Nietzsche than that of John Stuart Mill or Max Weber. Until recently, this kind of thinking did not carry well across the Atlantic and, accordingly, it was soon replaced in the United States with the positivist thesis that values and ethical ideals are purely subjective or are sociologically determined with no possible basis in objective fact, and by



the erroneous idea that psychoanalysis is a purely scientific technique with no prescriptive content or basis.

Fromm's analysis of the implicit ethical norms that inform Freudian theory and therapy show clearly how they contradict or override the value-relativism that was consciously espoused by Freud and his followers. In a manner of speaking, *Man for Himself* demonstrates that the tacit, inarticulate, and largely unconscious ethical dimension of Freud's theory of therapy is, in fact, far more humane and concrete than the specious value-neutrality espoused by some analysts in the ostensible interests of dignifying their discipline as a branch of the natural sciences. In so doing, it punctures some of the positivist pretensions that still linger in influential analytic circles and elsewhere in the behavioral sciences. This was typical of Fromm and although his borrowings from philosophy were eclectic, and occasionally tendentious or uncritical, this does not detract from the fundamental soundness or cogency of his analysis of Freud's ethical position, which could hardly be improved upon by a professional philosopher.

In the clinical dimension, things are somewhat more complex. In all his writings on clinical topics, Fromm handicapped himself by a deliberate policy of making minimal use of case histories and clinical vignettes. In *Man for Himself*, for example, Fromm illustrates his theoretical position with merely two dream specimens. His reticence about clinical experiences was prompted by a strong belief in patient confidentiality, and while he discussed case material with great thoroughness in his training seminars, he argued that most published case histories reveal enough about their subjects to permit other to surmise their real identity, thereby violating a first principle of analytic practice and often undermining the therapeutic benefits. Where the interests of scientific investigation and debate conflict with those of patient confidentiality, Fromm honored the patient's interest. This accounts for the somewhat vague and impressionistic character of his clinical vignettes.

Another drawback for the clinician is Fromm's tendency for overstatement, which was apparently prompted by a need to compensate for the narrow Freudianism he opposed. In his Foreword to the original edition of *Man for Himself*, Fromm stated: "Neurosis itself is, in the last analysis, a symptom of moral failure (although 'adjustment' is by no means a sign of moral achievement)." This is a monstrous overstatement. What about the noxious effects of trauma, neglect, and abuse that are chronicled so carefully in the

literature? Besides, anyone reading Freud's own case histories soon realizes that the symptomatology of many of his female patients was due less to moral failure or even sexual hunger, pure and simple, than to the stifling effects of oppressive class and gender roles that trapped women in sterile, subservient, or purely ornamental lives. Finally, by implication if not by direct attribution, the claim that all neurosis is symptomatic of failure – moral and otherwise – puts the onus on the afflicted person, rather than on the environment, and is therefore flagrantly inconsistent with Fromm's own emphasis on the cultural and economic determinants of mental disturbance.

Symptomatology often derived from the stifling effects of oppressive class and gender roles.

Thankfully, Fromm immediately went on to qualify this sweeping assertion with this, more balanced, one: "In many instances, a neurotic symptom is the specific expression of moral conflict and the success of the therapeutic effort depends on the understanding and solution of the person's moral problem." On reflection, this is a much more modest and plausible claim. He begins this sentence with the qualifier "in many instances ..." indicating that he has some or perhaps even most neuroses in mind. Instead of pontificating about "moral failure," he is emphasizing "moral conflict," which is ubiquitous in and fully consonant with Freud's model of the mind.

Even here a slight tendency for overstatement creeps in. Having qualified his categorical insistence that every neurosis is symptomatic of moral failure, he appears to convey that in the many cases where ethical conflicts are salient to the structure of neurotic symptomatology, understanding the underlying moral conflict is somehow sufficient to effect the desired therapeutic transformation. This is far from true. As Fromm himself was well aware, the nature and quality of relatedness between therapist and patient are always key. One can easily imagine a situation where a therapist "understands" the patient's underlying moral conflict accurately, but does not understand, or empathize with, other aspects of the patient's background or personality sufficiently to enable him or her to make use of this theoretical formulation. When this happens, patients submit to the superior wisdom of the analytic authority, but fail to achieve real insight and muddy



the picture with pseudo-health or fresh symptomatology or they may rebel against the judgmental attitude of the therapist. While both responses may be construed as signs of "resistance," they are often stimulated by the analyst's own bearing and attitudes – conscious and unconscious. Fromm's insights into the ethical dimension of analytic therapy are valuable and illuminating, but in his haste to explicate his emerging philosophical anthropology and his views on human nature, he neglected to make sufficient allowance for these clinical commonplaces in his published work to enable practitioners to apply his ideas concretely.

In a society freed from patriarchal authority, the Oedipus complex would disappear.

The most common reproach leveled against Fromm by analytically oriented clinicians that his is a reversion to a pre-Freudian psychology, which denies the importance of childhood and sexuality is not borne out in fact. Witness his discussion of the authoritarian conscience (or superego). He states plainly that children cannot help having sexual feelings and that the widespread tendency to stigmatize or taboo the sexuality of infants and children gives rise to unconscious guilt feelings and self-hatred.

Unlike orthodox Freudians, Fromm did not believe that infantile or child sexuality necessarily gives rise to guilt feelings or the superego as a result of castration anxiety and irrespective of prevailing environmental conditions. Fromm regarded the repression of childhood sexuality as an early installment in a more concerted strategy of socialization designed to break or disfigure the will, spontaneity, and independence of children in a patriarchal society that values submission to irrational authority. Indeed he interpreted the Oedipus complex – and rebellion against the father – in this light. The obvious, if unstated, implication of this analysis, which Fromm pursued at length elsewhere, is that a society freed from patriarchal authoritarianism, the Oedipus complex would disappear, or at any rate be confined to rare cases. Fromm regarded the Oedipus complex to a large extent as a social artifact and not as the hidden basis of all social organization as Freud evidently believed. Inasmuch as Freud regarded oedipal phenomena as the expression of a nuclear or "core complex," Fromm's revisionist interpretation will never be endorsed by orthodox Freudians. Neither

does it support the argument that Fromm's is a simple-minded reversion to pre-Freudian perspectives.

Another radical departure from Freudian orthodoxy – one that does lend some credence to the orthodox critique – is Fromm's characterology. In his attempts to explicate the baffling complexities of mental illness, Freud postulated a universal sequence of developmental stages that the growing organism must traverse and which culminate ideally in "genitality," but can easily be arrested at any point along the way in adverse circumstances or as a result of innate constitutional predispositions that short-circuit the process at some predetermined point. In Freud's system, any neurotic symptom or character trait can be understood – in principle, anyway – as a product of psychological regression to or fixation at a specific psychosexual phase, although arrested development in this sense does not mean anatomical abnormality, but is inferred from the subject's behavior that may or may not involve overtly "perverse" preoccupation with nongenital sexual expression.

Fromm's earliest discussions of psychoanalytic characterology are models of lucid, penetrating, and comprehensive exposition that merit study and comparison with the best efforts of Ferenczi, Abraham, and Freud himself. Like Ferenczi's and Abraham's contributions to the field, Fromm's showed great originality, as well as powerful analytical intelligence. About 1936, Fromm rejected the instinctivistic basis of Freudian characterology and began to construe the various libidinal positions identified by Freud as necessary stations on the road to maturity as merely different ways of filling one's metabolic needs – so many strategies or modes of assimilation that either are prompted or suppressed by prevailing social condition and not as epigenetically preprogrammed ontogenetic sequelae.

In Fromm's rendering, character structure is essentially a social artifact and, therefore, subject to the vagaries of macro-social and economic changes, not just the micro-social environment of the immediate family and its vicissitudes. In *Man for Himself*, Fromm dropped the organismic underpinnings of Freud's theory of character, to both good and bad effect. In fairness to Fromm and other existentially oriented critics of Freudian psychoanalysis – among them Ludwig Binswanger, Viktor Frankl, Rollo May – it is undeniable that human development and motivation, both conscious and unconscious, are driven by specifically human or psychological needs that are not reducible to the exigencies of erogenous satisfaction or tissue needs, but by needs for a sense of oneness or solidarity with others, for a framework of orientation and devo-



tion, and for self-actualization. These needs can be as profoundly unconscious as their libidinal counterparts, and their frustration in adverse circumstances can be just as detrimental to our psychological well being; indeed often more so. In attempting to disentangle the idea of character structure from purely organismic constraints and early childhood experiences, Fromm made it possible to focus on character deformations that arise from the necessity to adapt to the adult environment; an approach that is more congruent with current conceptions of socialization as an ongoing, lifelong process, and not something that is done and over with by the time a person reaches puberty. Fromm's notion of the marketing character, which has no analogue in Freud's psychosexual schema and has no specific anchoring in our somatic makeup, is a good example of this kind of reasoning and the increments it yields in understanding widespread patterns of human behavior.

Many analysts are loath to endorse or even entertain many of Fromm's ideas because they imply a radical critique of prevailing social organization. Fromm said in effect, if not always in so many words, that the way in which we are constrained to fill our material needs is often profoundly at odds without deeper human needs for real self-actualization and solidarity with other human beings. This socially patterned discrepancy gives rise to the frequent violation and eventual constriction of our humanistic conscience, resulting in many varieties of mental anguish. Though mainstream analytic theory has yet to take cognizance of this fact, clinical experience bears out Fromm's contention that the unconscious conflicts that generate symptomatology are not limited to the inner eruptions from the traumatized or conflicted child that slumbers and dreams within all of us, but include the chronic and acute crises engendered by specifically adult problems and situations which, more often than not, have an ethical dimension.

Despite the increment in the breadth of perspective entailed in Fromm's revisionist theory, he was evidently aware of the serious problems involved in abandoning the instinctivistic premises of Freudian theory. If we reject the idea of a universal sequence of psychosexual phases, or of some sequence of developmental phases that is inborn and universal, the concepts of fixation and regression that are seemingly indispensable to analytic discourse, suddenly become moot. Regression to what? Fixation where? Though he did write later about syndromes of growth and regression in somewhat global and impressionistic terms, Fromm did not address these questions with the rigor and

imagination he showed in other areas. Despite the paucity of case material, technical directives, and a penchant for overstatement, *Man for Himself* is full of ideas that the practicing clinician as well as the layperson will find stimulating and useful. Indeed, many of these ideas could be applied fruitfully to problems of differential diagnosis, though Fromm himself was remiss in not developing these ideas further in this direction. His remarks on the differences between intelligence and reason and between reproductive and generative perception, and their relationship to paranoia, psychosis and the psychology of adjustment, all warrant close attention, as do his remarks on "productive" thinking and how it differs from more stereotypical modes of reasoning. In a much neglected book, *Metamorphosis*, Fromm's friend and collaborator of many years, Ernst Schachtel, attempts to apply and extend some of Fromm's ideas in an ethological and phenomenological vein. In my own work, I have tried to unpack some of the logical implications of Fromm's work in this regard. But these efforts hardly exhaust the potential range of application for elements of Fromm's synthesis of psychoanalysis and philosophy. Much remains to be done.

Chronic and acute crises are engendered by specific adult problems, often of ethical dimension.

As Fromm remarked on more than one occasion, any substantial advance in our knowledge of human nature has generally been won at the expense of a certain one-sidedness of focus and emphasis which only subsequent applications and inquiries can correct. This claim was intended to exonerate Freud, but in retrospect, it applies with equal justice to Fromm as well. Though hardly uncritical of Freud, Fromm was faithful to him in his fashion and grappled creatively with Freud's ideas and influence throughout his long career. His theoretical ardor and the sheer wealth and liveliness of his ideas, make his writings both readable and stimulating.

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