



## BRIEF COMMUNICATION

### ERICH FROMM'S LEGACY: BEYOND A TWO-PERSON PSYCHOLOGY\*

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THE EXCHANGE between Jay Frankel (1998 a, b) and Irwin Hirsh (1998) in this journal has raised many questions concerning the influence of the founding members of the William Alanson White Institute on contemporary interpersonal and relational psychoanalysis. In the exchange and in ensuing commentary, Fromm's clinical approach has been described by Frankel as authoritative, direct, confrontational, and focusing on the here and now at the expense of analyzing the significance of past experience. Hirsh notes that Fromm appealed to the patient's sense of realism and vitality, in order to mobilize a sense of urgency. Joining this exchange, Mitchell (1999) believes Fromm had a strong bias toward seeing dependence as regressive and pathological. All three authors acknowledge Fromm's important contribution to relational approaches by his emphasis on authenticity and honesty in psychoanalytic work.

Fromm did not leave a comprehensive statement of his clinical approach. This has made it difficult for new generations of interpersonal and relational analysts to properly assess his clinical contributions. In our edited book, *A Prophetic Analyst: Erich Fromm's Contributions to Psychoanalysis* (1996), Michael Maccoby and I have attempted to evaluate Fromm's theoretical and clinical contributions with the hindsight of almost twenty years.

For Fromm, the goal of psychoanalysis is to expand the ground of human freedom by making the unconscious conscious. Fromm thought Freud's discovery of the dynamic unconscious was his greatest contribu-

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tion to the humanistic project of the enlightenment by showing how reason can become distorted by the power of unconscious passions.

Fromm rejected the interpersonalist, culturalist, and neo-Freudian labels used to classify his work. He respected Sullivan's contribution, but saw himself closer in spirit to Freud in his focus on dynamically repressed perceptions and impulses. Yet Fromm's effort to extend psychoanalysis beyond the individual and consider social and economic factors that influence development, as well as his adherence to Freud's impulse psychology—albeit a “relationalized” version of Freud's impulse psychology—are often overlooked as significant components of his clinical approach.

In clinical seminars (Cuernavaca, Mexico, 1968; Locarno, Switzerland, 1974) Fromm did not ignore or reject the significance of early experience for development. He thought, however, that an exclusive emphasis on the pathogenic influence of families during childhood was too limited an approach for several reasons:

1. Childhood experience sets prototypes for development, but does not determine it. Possibilities for growth and for pathology remain open through the life cycle.
2. Understanding pathogenic influences from childhood is futile unless this knowledge comes alive in the present. Fromm's clinical approach consisted in discovering the motivational structure of individuals as it exists in the present. He likened his approach to taking an x-ray of a person's character, laying bare its unconscious motivational structure. Fromm wanted to know what sustained this motivational structure. How did motivation affect values and life choices? What life practices were required to make changes? Fromm distrusted cerebral interpretations. He always questioned with students and colleagues what import intellectual ideas and belief systems had for the conduct of their lives.
3. The influence of parenting on development is multifaceted. The quality of parenting (i.e., loving, rejecting, or controlling qualities) is not the only important factor that influences the development of children. Parents are also powerful agents of socialization, conveying conscious and unconscious values, attitudes, and expectations of the social and cultural group to which they belong. As Fromm put it, parents function as “psychic agents of society.”
4. A comprehensive approach toward development requires an un-



derstanding of economic and cultural factors that individuals and families *must* adapt to in order to survive and prosper in their social milieu.

Fromm saw his main contribution as broadening the understanding of unconscious processes by looking beyond the family to the influence of society at large. Fromm described how even healthy impulses or desires that conflict with society's demands *must* be repressed in order for individuals or groups to function in society. This repressed experience constitutes what Fromm called the "social unconscious." He used the concept of social unconscious as a contrast to the traditional concept of the unconscious, which was limited to the individual and to the effects of early experience on development. Fromm developed the concept of social character to describe the sum total of shared values, attitudes, and beliefs shaped by the need to adapt to prevailing social, cultural, and economic conditions. Social character functions as a social glue that holds large groups of individuals together. This glue can become social dynamite when a particular social character is no longer adapted to prevailing socioeconomic conditions.

Powerful unconscious fears are activated not only when primary emotional ties to parental figures are threatened, but also when our role and function in society is in jeopardy. For example, intense fear could be generated when Mexican campesinos (who had lived in servitude for generations on haciendas) contemplated an independent activity that did not please authority figures. As Fromm and Maccoby (1970) showed, this unconscious fear had to be analyzed, if young campesinos were to take advantage of new economic opportunities—a process Fromm and Maccoby called "social psychoanalysis."

For middle managers in the decades of the 1940s to the 1980s, security in large corporations or bureaucracies was based on being a loyal team player and getting along with the boss. As Whyte (1956) described in his classic sociological study, the company man's greatest fear was of not fitting in or becoming ostracized.

Today, fears of intimacy have become a frequent symptom of bright young men and women entering the brave new world of the global economy and unregulated markets. To remain competitive in the global economy of the 1990s it is necessary to develop the motivation to constantly learn new competencies and embrace a culture that requires mobility and putting in long hours. Intimate emotional ties are a



distraction from the frantic corporate pace, threatening promotions and juicy perks.<sup>1</sup>

Without appreciating Fromm's attempt to further the emancipatory project of the enlightenment by integrating Freud's discovery of the dynamic unconscious with Marxist and Weberian sociological traditions, any discussion of Fromm's strengths and weaknesses misses the mark.

### Fromm's Clinical Practice: Strengths and Weaknesses

Fromm believed that we could only understand other human beings by being deeply related to them. This required an empathic immersion into their subjective worlds. But for Fromm, empathy was not simply a mirroring response. Fromm believed that the patient should be respected as someone who seeks the truth and is not only evading it. Truth, even if painful, could have an enlivening effect, mobilizing resources the patient didn't believe he or she had. Fromm emphasized that truthfulness and genuineness required courage from the patient *and* the analyst. Fromm observed that it was often the analyst's anxiety and insecurity that made him or her recoil from being more direct and truthful with patients.

For Fromm, psychoanalytic treatment required a certain degree of openness, vitality, and capacity for self-reflection. The psychoanalytic clinician had to make a careful clinical judgment as to the suitability of patients for analysis. Fromm was aware that this criterion limited the number of patients who could benefit from psychoanalysis. He hoped for and was open to the development of other treatment approaches and somatic treatments—an attitude unusual for analysts of his generation. Fromm's technique was always changing, trying to make the clinical encounter more meaningful. In the 1940s he gave up the use of the couch and met with patient face to face, in order to enliven the therapy sessions. He also developed a more experiential approach to dreams, integrating Freud's belief that the royal road to the unconscious led to our darkest wishes with Jung's belief that the unconscious could express our highest aspirations (Fromm, 1951). In the 1950s, Fromm experimented with a focused free association technique, keeping free association from becoming trivialized into free chatter. In the 1960s, under the influence

<sup>1</sup> Maccoby (1999) has put forth the interesting hypothesis that the prevalent fear of intimacy seen in many young adults may be related to the fact that as children they were raised in households where their fathers and mothers worked outside of the home. These children may grow up to feel emotionally less secure than children who had parents that were more available.



of Suzuki, he attempted to integrate psychoanalysis with Zen Buddhism (Fromm, Suzuki & DeMartino, 1960). In the 1970s, influenced by Nyana-ponika Thera (1962), he turned to a less confrontational version of Buddhism, focussing on concentration exercises and experimenting with movement exercises, such as T'ai-Chi. Fromm believed these exercises complemented psychoanalysis (or self-analysis) by increasing awareness of body and mind.

As Hirsh (1998) and Frankel (1998a, b) point, out, Fromm was unflinching in his honesty and directness, and he expected the same attitude from patients. With patients who had suffered serious trauma, however, Fromm showed tact and compassion (Bacciagaluppi, 1996). Fromm *did not* believe a confrontational attitude was helpful in analysis. He thought the best way to overcome resistance was to put oneself in the patients' shoes. Analysis would become less confrontational and patients would be able to relinquish their defensiveness to the extent that this empathic "jump" into their experience was genuine. In moments when a deep recognition took place, patients would no longer feel judged. Developing this type of truthfulness and authenticity in analysis was more a matter of the heart than of the head, not a question of technique, but of creating an analytic attitude. Fromm likened his role to that of a trained instrument that would resonate to what the patient said. The patient might be surprised by some of his reactions, but he or she was free to agree or disagree with him. Yet Fromm's description of his work does not square with the experience of many of his analysands who felt judged by him, as did David Riesman, author of the classic *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), and Michael Maccoby, who studied with Fromm over an eight-year period (Michael Maccoby, personal communication). It is to this contradiction that I now turn.

### Weaknesses in Fromm's Clinical Approach

Fromm's idealism and courage could be overbearing, a moral vision that Maccoby (1996) depicts as Fromm's prophetic voice (in contrast to Fromm's analytic voice). Fromm's prophetic voice was experienced by many of his students and analysands as a demand to live up to a model of emotional and intellectual development—the ideal of human productivity elaborated in Fromm's work. Some of his analysands and students who did not have the confidence to stand up to Fromm (not an easy task) tried to live up to his ideal of productivity. Fromm's presence could



be intimidating. His brilliance and moral passion could overwhelm the analytic process. Ironically, his idealization limited autonomy, rather than fostering it. As Maccoby points out, Fromm did not adequately analyze this transference. An idealization of Fromm accounts for some of the “macho” and “tough” attitudes that Mitchell (1999) describes encountering in some “Frommian” analysts in the White Institute, and that Saavedra (1994) has also described in the Mexican Psychoanalytic Institute, where Fromm taught for many years. According to Maccoby, who collaborated with Fromm for many years, Fromm was not authoritarian. He sincerely welcomed critical attitudes and was responsive to those who questioned him.

I agree with Mitchell that Fromm had a negative view of childhood dependency. Fromm sometimes seems to imply that severing bonds with primary ties (attachment figures) is a necessary condition for autonomy and freedom. As attachment theory and research has shown, an effective dependence (a secure attachment) is the emotional basis for exploration and competency in childhood and leads to less dependency in later development (see Cortina, 1996, for an extended discussion of this issue).

Fromm rejected Freud’s tension reduction metapsychology associated with drive and impulse. Fromm, however, retained the idea that irrational passions (impulses), such as sadism, masochism, revenge, necrophilia, or the regressive wish to return to the safety of the womb and blood ties, are driving forces in psychopathology. In contrast to Freud, who believed there was an *inherent* conflict between instinctual drives and the civilizing role of society, Fromm (1964, 1973) believed regressive passions (impulses) were failed attempts to develop loving and life-affirming relationships with others and with the world. In this sense, Fromm’s “id psychology” is deeply relational.

Fromm’s emphasis on the pathology of irrational passions fits reasonably well with patients who have severe character pathology or sociopathic personalities. In these patients, Sullivan’s understanding of the malignant transformation of security operations complements Fromm’s sketchy remarks regarding the development of irrational passions. But for many people with less severe personality disorders, in which sadistic, masochistic, or destructive impulses are *not* prominent features, Fromm’s analysis can be very misleading. A better approach with patients with less severe character disorders is to accept their basic motives and needs as legitimate. In these patients, the analytic task proceeds in two directions: (1) understanding how basic needs have become derailed from



normal, more adaptive relational pathways to less adaptive patterns that are debilitating and self-defeating; (2) exploring ways patients can develop more effective, less conflicted, more authentic, and mature modes of relating to self and to others. This position is consistent with the work of Bowlby, Sullivan, and to some extent Kohut.<sup>2</sup>

Fromm underestimated the effects of severe anxiety, how it blocked learning and threatened security operations (Sullivan) or self-cohesion (Kohut). Some patients, however, may not be challenged to grow by a cautious attitude that underestimates their strengths, a lesson we can learn from Fromm.

### Fromm and Postmodernism

Because of revisionists like Fromm, a new freedom to question and to explore differences and commonalities between psychoanalytic traditions has emerged. I think that one of the most important dimensions to explore in contemporary debates is the extent to which analysts from different psychoanalytic schools come to terms with basic assumptions in regard to truth, objectivity, and human nature, which Fromm and Sullivan took for granted. However flawed in its clinical application, Fromm put forward an explicit ethical and social vision based on the concepts of human development and human nature. As Maccoby and I point out, this moral vision at times clashed with Fromm's efforts to expand and revise Freud. But when he succeeded, the combination was potent and compelling.

The current postmodern-deconstructivist movement in literature, psychoanalysis, and the social sciences directly challenges Fromm's basic assumptions. Psychoanalytic authors within this movement consider the legacy of the enlightenment and of humanistic thinking as deeply flawed and call for the dismissal of these philosophical traditions. Concepts of truth and objectivity are considered passé, at best an expression of philo-

<sup>2</sup> The developmental model implicit in Sullivan's and, more explicit, in Bowlby's work can be described as a developmental pathway model. This model has similarities with the relational-conflict model proposed by Mitchell, but has different assumptions from the developmental-arrest model that is implicit in the work of Balint, Winnicott, and Kohut. The concept of developmental pathways is modeled on nonlinear, dynamic systems principles. These principles are multicausal and probabilistic, not deterministic. Understanding pathology in terms of the derailment of normal development processes is very different from an understanding of pathology in terms of regression or fixation. The concepts of regression and fixation are mechanistic and do not explain the complexity of developmental processes.





sophical naiveté, at worst an attempt to hide power relations by cloaking them under the guise of objectivity or science.<sup>3</sup> This is a very large subject that I cannot develop here (see Cortina, 1999, for a discussion of some of these issues).

Constructivist, deconstructivist, hermeneutic, and perspectival movements in psychoanalysis have turned to relational, two-person, intersubjective and cultural analysis in an effort to debunk what they consider positivistic and ahistorical concepts of human nature, truth, and objectivity (Flax, 1993; Gergen, 1998). Many authors who have adopted constructivist and hermeneutic approaches do not endorse such an extreme position. Yet, as Silverman (1999) has keenly observed, authors who start with constructivist, hermeneutic, and perspectival positions easily “slip” inadvertently into relativistic positions. For instance, from an intersubjective and hermeneutic perspective, it is essential to acknowledge that the psychoanalytic dialogue is cocreated. There is a slippage to a relativistic position, however, when this position insists that there is no truth, only perspectives, or when acknowledging the analyst and patient’s subjective embeddedness leads to a slippage to a relativist position by insisting that there is no objectivity in the analytic situation—a slippage that Hirsh falls into in his discussion with Frankel.

Fromm tends to make sweeping statements about the universality of ethical norms that have to be scrutinized carefully. His concept of human nature needs to be revised in light of contemporary findings in developmental psychology and the neurosciences (Cortina, 1996). Yet at the present time, with important advances in developmental psychology, developmental psychopathology, cross-cultural comparisons of development, and neurobiology, it is ironic that so many are giving up on the idea of human nature.

Fromm believed that the multiple manifestations of the human condition were not arbitrary. Lawful regularities could be studied and objective criteria could be developed that identify conditions that bring out the best and the worst in us—our “genius for good and evil.” The search for lawful regularities in human development and in social processes must be grounded historically and culturally, without recourse to transcendental claims and metaphysical props. This is a complex and chal-

<sup>3</sup> By asserting that there is no foundation to support universal ethical norms or truth claims, and by reducing these claims to nothing more than power strategies, deconstructivism provides plenty of ammunition to right-wing fundamentalism and conservative ideologies that accuse the left of moral bankruptcy.





lenging project that by necessity is interdisciplinary in nature and requires philosophical sophistication. I believe Habermas (1984) is an example of the type of philosophy that is called for: a philosophy that has not given up on the emancipatory project of the enlightenment and has remained grounded socially and historically. It is no accident that Fromm and Habermas depart from the same tradition of a critical social science.

In sum, Fromm advanced a project to expand psychoanalysis beyond the individual to society at large. He integrated this project with an elegant model of human nature and a courageous effort to put humanistic values at the center of our search for meaning and purpose. In evaluating Fromm's impact on contemporary psychoanalysis, I do not see his vision reflected in current debates. Bellah, Sullivan, Swindler, and Tipton (1985) and Cushman (1993) argue that psychoanalysis has become absorbed into a highly individualistic, therapeutic, and consumer-oriented culture that undermines strong ethical commitments and social responsibility. Fromm shows how psychoanalysis can deepen our understanding of the relationship between the individual and society, while strengthening our ability to be humanly and socially responsible. Fromm also shows how we can go beyond a two-person paradigm, which dominates current debates in psychoanalysis, by moving toward a more comprehensive social psychology that takes economic and cultural factors seriously into consideration.

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