

## Erich Fromm (1900–1980)

Charles Darwin once classified scientists as either “splitters” or “lumpers.” Erich Fromm, who died at the age of 79 in Lucerne, Switzerland, on March 18, 1980, was clearly a lumper. Trained as a psychoanalyst, Fromm emerged, on the basis of his own erudition, as a social critic and moral philosopher of considerable reknown. In a very real sense he applied his gifts as a clinician to diagnoses of the ills of society and of social institutions. His well-known books such as *Escape From Freedom*, *The Sane Society*, and *The Art of Loving* attest not only to his original social insights but also to his ability to communicate his ideas simply and directly to a wide audience.

Erich Fromm was born in Germany in 1900 to middle-class Jewish parents. After completing his work at the Gymnasium, he attended the University of Heidelberg, where he studied sociology, philosophy, and psychology, attaining his PhD at the age of 22. Although Fromm’s scholarly interests were deep and abiding, so too was his concern for people; this concern stimulated his interest in psychoanalysis. At that time (in accord with Freud’s wishes) the training of lay analysts was common practice, and Fromm was accepted and trained at the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute.

At the Berlin Institute Fromm met and married his first wife, Freida Fromm Reichman. After completing their training, Fromm and his wife helped to found and run the Psychoanalytic Institute in Frankfurt. In 1933, as the political situation in Germany worsened, Fromm accepted an invitation from the Chicago Psychoanalytic Institute to come to the United States. Fromm liked America, but preferring to settle in New York City instead of Chicago, he became one of the founders and trustees, along with Harry Stack Sullivan, of the William Alanson White Institute.

Fromm had a private practice in New York City for many years and also held faculty positions at a number of colleges and universities, including the New School for Social Research, Yale, Michigan State, Columbia, and New York University. In 1949, Fromm, who had a continuing interest in Spanish culture, accepted a professorship at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, where he built a department of psychoanalysis in the graduate department of the medical school. In addition, Fromm founded and directed the Mexican Psychoanalytic Institute. After his retirement in 1965, Fromm continued to commute to New York from Mexico to teach, supervise, and engage in other professional activities. In 1976, Fromm and his third wife, Annis Freeman Fromm (his second wife, Henny Sinlaud, had died in 1952), moved to Switzerland.

It is always difficult to summarize a person’s life work in a few paragraphs, particularly when the individual was as prolific and as broad in his interests as Erich Fromm. Nonetheless, it is possible to state the major theme of his work, one that united all of his writing. It is a theme that Fromm shared with Wilhelm Reich, although the two men dealt with it quite differently. Fromm, like Reich, was a student of Marx and Freud and was constantly trying to integrate their two opposed positions—Freud’s view that human nature determined society versus Marx’s view that society determined human nature.

For both Fromm and Reich, the individual was inexorably caught between instinctual drives on the one hand and social forces on the other. Not surprisingly, both men saw aspects of society as working against the realization of human freedom, and both advocated new social systems that would free humans to be themselves while retaining love for and attachment to others. But Reich saw human freedom as equivalent to sexual liberty, and his increasingly bizarre ideas made even his valuable insights suspect. Fromm, in contrast, saw human freedom as a lifelong struggle to realize one’s transcendent human qualities while recognizing that such realization was always socially bound and that, eventually, one had to succumb to one’s animal nature, namely, aging and death.

It was this concept of freedom as a lifelong struggle to realize one’s uniquely human potential against the opposition of both animal being and restrictive social forces that informed all of Fromm’s writing. Indeed, Fromm regarded himself as a “dialectic humanist,” by which he meant that one’s struggle for human dignity and freedom was unceasing. In gaining freedom from one form of bondage, one necessarily opens oneself up to a new, higher level of enslavement. The young adolescent who breaks free from the restraints of parents, for example, becomes subject to the controls of the peer group, and the battle for individuation and freedom must be begun anew.

The endless struggle for human freedom is anxiety provoking and frightening. Many people choose not to engage in the battle and instead choose to “escape from freedom” by means of “mechanisms of escape” that Fromm saw as “unproductive” both to the individual and to society. Among the unproductive orientations are the “receptive” character whose prime aim in life is to seek and win approval from others, the “exploitative” character who aggressively demands and takes what he or she wants, the “hoarding” person who is attached to things and seeks to escape from the freedom and anxiety



associated with divesting oneself of ownership of and concern for material things, and the "marketing" character who seeks to escape from freedom by attaining visible material success.

Fromm regarded these orientations as ultimately destructive because in each of these orientations neither the individual nor society is well served. In his writing Fromm argued that the "productive" orientation was really the only solution to our existential dilemma of being both animal and human, both individual and social. The attainment of a productive character, reminiscent of Jung's "individuated self," is an extraordinary achievement for which everyone has the potential but for which few have the required will and stamina. The truly productive character has conquered greed, selfishness, and loneliness and is, in contemporary terminology, at Kohlberg's Stage 6.

In his many books Fromm dealt with different barriers and avenues to the attainment of a productive orientation. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in *The Art of Loving*, perhaps his most popular book. For Fromm, there was not one but many levels of loving. Some forms of love, like brotherly love and motherly love, are productive insofar as they are directed toward others and involve caring, responsibility, and respect. Erotic love, in contrast, is a less productive orientation because of its exclusive character, particularly when a couple feel that they need no one but each other. Self-love is the least productive form, since it involves self-hatred as well and thus serves neither the individual nor society very well.

In Fromm's view, the love of God is the highest form of love that an individual can attain. In speaking of a love of God, however, Fromm did not mean it in a strictly religious sense. Rather, he meant a love of humankind, a sense of caring, respect, and responsibility for humanity. This love of humanity is the best answer to the existential dilemma. It unites the individual with the social, and as a result, the individual's death becomes less tragic because what he or she loves, cares about, and has contributed to lives on. As part of humanity, part of human history, and part of a universal love, the individual lives on despite passing away. We transcend our animal nature, our destiny with death, only when we become truly human in the sense of loving humankind.

Although Fromm's notion of love for God or humanity in some way parallels Erikson's sense of "universal" identity and Kohlberg's sixth stage, they are not identical; Fromm's humanism sets them apart. The concern with our special qualities as humans and with our uniquely human dilemmas is characteristic not only of Fromm but also of Harry Stack Sullivan and, indeed, of the workers at the William Alanson White Institute. An example of this humanism is what might be called "the ethics of friendship." It is my impression that for the William Alanson White group, in general, and for Sullivan and Fromm, in particular, friendship was a relationship of the highest order and could not be entered into lightly.

Friendship imposes obligations to keep in touch, to ask for help when it is needed, to be supportive when support is necessary, and, not least of all, to challenge intellectually with respect and with responsibility. Fromm was always there for his friends, and the quality of his friendship is a testimony to his concept of humanism.

As a person Fromm was warm and friendly but also maintained a quiet reserve, a sense of privacy and personal space. In conversation he was attentive and a good listener, but he was not overly serious and had a lively sense of humor. Those who were trained by him remember him with respect and fondness. In his clinical work he was diagnostically incisive and clear and direct in his formulations. Having broken with the classical Freudians (he was considered one of the neo-Freudians), he felt free to introduce and to suggest some of the social, cultural conditions that may have contributed to a patient's condition. His offering of his own original formulations gave his training sessions a liveliness and freshness that enhanced their teaching value.

Even though Fromm was not a man of robust health or athletically inclined, he was vigorous and energetic interpersonally. He liked small celebrations like birthday parties and was always a warm, sensitive, and gracious host who was thoughtful about the interests and needs of his guests. Intellectually, he had a vast curiosity, read widely, and continued to study and take courses (even at the age of 72) in fields like neuroanatomy, where he felt new discoveries were being made. He was a disciplined worker and tried to reserve a period of time each day (from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. in his later years) for study and writing. Each day he also engaged in some self-analysis, which, following Freud, he regarded as critical for personal growth.

Although Fromm was regarded as a popular writer by academics and as a social psychologist by psychoanalysts (a condescending term in their lexicon), his contributions to social science and to therapeutic practice were considerable. Much of contemporary social criticism, such as that of Christopher Lasch, for example, follows a model that Fromm laid down. And it was Fromm who gave Marx's term *alienation* a psychodynamic rendering. Likewise, many of Fromm's therapeutic concepts, like "emotional touching," have become part of accepted therapeutic lore.

In my opinion, Fromm's greatest contribution was his humanism as he articulated it and lived it. He himself expressed it best in the following words:

It is a system of thought and feeling cultured upon man, his growth, integrity, dignity and freedom, upon man as an end in himself, and not as a means towards anything, upon his capacity to be active not as an individual but as a participant in history, and the fact that every man carries within himself all of humanity

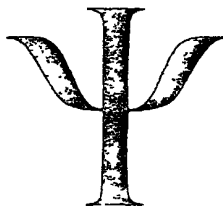
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