

## FROMM'S APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF PERSONALITY

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MY attempt in this paper is to present in a clear-cut fashion Fromm's<sup>1,2</sup> premises and some of his most significant ideas that apply to the study of human personality, and to contrast them with Freud's<sup>3</sup> premises and views.

1) Freud's interpretation of man is primarily a biological one. In spite of his concern with the role of society, his primary emphasis on the individual, coupled with the lack of comparative anthropological studies in his time, caused him to give inadequate consideration to the socio-cultural forces in man's personality. He applied to society his theory of instincts, and saw sociological processes as instinctual products.

Consistent with his belief in a biologically fixed human nature, he considered phenomena that at present we know to be absent, or lacking in emphasis in some cultures, as fixed and universal attributes of man. Freud visualized man as primarily self-contained, provided by nature with certain physiologically conditioned impulses, and only secondarily with social ones. Man's relationship with society is in Freud's view a static one. The only role society has is to check man's ineradicably evil tendencies, or to provide for them acceptable means of satisfaction. Only the repressive aspects of culture are given weight. Freud's psychology is, in the last analysis, the study of the satisfaction or frustration of instinctual needs and their consequences.

2) Fromm sees man as primarily social, molded in his historical evolution and personal existence by the social conditions in which he lives. The ideological, religious, economic, and political forces that operate in the social process have a dynamism of their own. A product of man, they also create man. What characterizes man as such, Fromm says, "is his relative independence from instincts." Instincts, understood as "specific action patterns determined by inherited neurological structure are a diminishing category in man." Instincts like hunger, thirst, sex, etc., are fixed parts of his biological organization and imperatively demand satisfaction, although they vary in their ways of expression and satisfaction in different cultures. But it is when instincts are satisfied that the real existence of man begins. "The chain of stimulus and response characteristic of animals is interrupted in man." He has fewer predetermined courses of behavior than any other animal. His adjustment to the world is essentially based on learning and culture. Fromm continues:

"Man cannot live by following the pattern of the species. . . . He has to learn to live. . . . He can choose and so he has to think and to decide. . . . The

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things in which man differs, his passions and anxieties, loves, hatreds, lust for power or craving for submission, the enjoyment of sensual pleasures or the fear of them, are products of the social process."

They are primary phenomena and not the secondary results of satisfaction or frustration of instinctual needs.

Instead of fixed patterns, Fromm believes that man has developed in the course of evolution unique capacities: reason, imagination, and self-awareness. These capacities he is compelled to use if he is to continue existing. Fromm expresses it in this way:

"Man's inadequacy of instinctual equipment makes him the weakest creature at birth, but this weakness is the source of his strength. His being social generates needs that are not ingrained in his biological structure; and they are as compulsive as those: The need to relate to the world, not to be alone, to have values, and symbols. . . . There are capacities that man has acquired in the course of history, such as critical and creative thought, the capacity of differentiating between sensorial and emotional experiences, the sense of justice, which, once developed in history, become inherent to human nature."

Reason, imagination, and self-awareness disrupt man's harmony with nature. Having these capacities, he cannot avoid being aware of the contingencies and contradictions of his existence and of his ultimate end, death. It is characteristic of the human mind not to remain passive in the face of contradictions. The most fundamental and all-inclusive need of man, says Fromm, is to restore his unity with nature, finding answers and emotional ties that give meaning to his life and tell him where he stands and what he has to do. Organized religion, secular systems of thought, or private ideologies fulfill this need. Fromm calls them "frames of orientation and devotion."

### THE INDIVIDUATION PROCESS

7) The only basic biological drive Fromm recognizes in man is the drive to live and to grow. Growth occurs automatically, and it implies increasing individuation and independence. The new-born child begins his existence psychologically welded to his mother. He belongs with her, and his safety is based on this fact. His growth and maturation processes, fostered by education (which implies frustrations, prohibitions, and also hostility), gradually lead the child to an awareness of himself as a separate entity from his mother and to the loosening of these "primary ties" in which his feelings of safety rest. Growing individuation also means growing isolation and growing anxiety. The process cannot be reversed; the child has to gain security by new means, and he does so by relating himself to the world around him, and to himself, in some meaningful fashion. The kind of relatedness he establishes depends on his ego-integration and inner strength. If the growing individuation process and the growth in strength, (whose limits depend on individual and social conditions), have been harmoniously correlated in their speed and degree, the kind of relatedness he establishes is such that he becomes a

“productive” individual. This means a human being who, retaining and continuously increasing his individuality, feels safe because he finds his place in a world to which he is spontaneously related by his reason, his capacity to love, and his productive work.

If there has not been a correspondence between his growth in inner strength and his individuation, he has to escape from his unbearable feelings of isolation and powerlessness by renouncing his independence and freedom, and relating symbiotically or destructively to the world and to himself in unproductive ways which Fromm calls “mechanisms of escape.”

Fromm differentiates between the unavoidable dependency of the child and neurotic submission. In the child, the helplessness is factual; he is only dimly aware of himself as a separate entity, and he can accept it. For a neurotic, submission has a different quality; he cannot accept it because he is aware of himself as an individual, and so hostility is experienced consciously or unconsciously in proportion to his helplessness and dependency.

#### CHARACTEROLOGY

Fromm has been particularly interested in problems of characterology. He begins by subscribing to the classical differentiation between temperament, talents, and natural endowments on the one side, and character on the other.

- a) He agrees with Freud, first, in considering character as an integration of energies underlying behavior; second, in emphasizing the compulsiveness of character traits that can be completely unconscious for the individual; third,
- c) in considering fundamental the total organization (“orientation”) of character from which isolated traits are derived; and, fourth, in attributing to childhood experiences the greatest importance in character formation.

He deviates from Freud in some important matters. Freud accounted for character integration by combining his characterology with his libido theory. Character, according to him, depends fundamentally on the various types of libidinal organization. Character traits are nothing but sublimations of, or reaction-formations against, libidinal and destructive impulses. They are compulsive because of their instinctual source.

Fromm defines character as the “relatively fixed, specific way in which human energies are channelized in the process of living.” Man satisfies his needs by acquiring and assimilating things (“assimilation”), and by relating himself to people and to himself (“socialization”). In order to live, man has to get things either by producing them or by taking or receiving them from an outside source. In the same way, man cannot live alone; complete isolation is unbearable and incompatible with sanity. Man has to relate to the world and to others in these two processes in some fashion, and the specific way he does so determines his character. Characterological attitudes express themselves in all realms of human performances: intellectual, emotional, sexual, etc. So although Fromm considers that Freud’s descriptions of the “oral,”

“anal,” and “genital” character are correct, the interpretation he proposes is different. He believes that the satisfaction or frustration of biological needs, in themselves, have little significance for the formation of character. For instance, the time and way in which a child is weaned or trained in toilet habits only matters as it is an index of the totality of attitudes of the parents toward the child. What really matters is the way in which the child relates to the personal and impersonal environment that surrounds him. Once the child has related “orally” (receptively), or “genitally” (productively), this will find expression in the child’s intellectual, emotional, sexual, and alimentary behavior.

Character, says Fromm:

“. . . is the human substitute for the animal instinctual apparatus. . . . It determines the quality of thinking, feeling, and acting of the individual. . . . It allows him to act consistently and rapidly, saving him from having to deliberately make decisions each time he acts.”

The role that Fromm ascribes to socio-cultural factors in the integration of character can be appreciated in his concept of the “social character.” The characters of the individuals in a given culture have a common core that develops as a result of “basic experiences and common ways of living in the group.” The dominant social and cultural patterns are transmitted to the child by his parents, who carry them in their own character, and who also apply the prevalent educational system. In character formation, the family is the “psychic agency of society.” This common core, the social character, is complemented by all the individual characterological differences that result from the interaction of different innate capacities and temperaments and different individual situations and experiences. If the character of a given individual conforms to the social character, his impulses will be oriented in the direction desired by his culture, and he will find satisfaction and practical reward by acting as he wishes to act.

Fromm accounts for the compulsive nature of character traits by the fact that they are specific trends developed early in infancy, and so they are the only possible paths of relatedness for the individual. He describes the different ways of relatedness in the process of socialization and assimilation. We will only briefly mention them. In the process of assimilation, a person can be unproductive (receptive, exploitative, hoarding, “marketing”), or productive. In the process of socialization, a person can be symbiotic (sado-masochistic), destructive, automaton-conformed, or loving. The orientations in both processes are intimately related. The predominant trends in relatedness signal the orientation of the total character. Productive character is the term Fromm uses to refer to the healthy or normal character. The term productiveness requires some clarification. Man is a producing animal. In order to live he has to transform the materials he finds, using his reason and his imagination. Material production is but one aspect of it, for men can be

productive in all realms of experience: mental, emotional, and sensory, involving responses to others, to things, and to himself. In general terms, productiveness is man's ability to use his powers and to realize the potentialities inherent in him. The productive person is the one who makes full use of his specifically human qualities, relating to the world through love, reason, and constructive action.

In Freud's views, the "genital" character is the normal or healthy character. Again the term is acceptable, says Fromm, if "genital" is taken as a symbol of the generative capacities of man in all realms of experience.

#### LOVE AND DESTRUCTIVENESS

The libido theory presupposes a fixed quantity of energy. Accordingly, the alternative for a person is to love others and not to love himself, or to love himself and so be selfish and incapable of loving others. This alternative, says Fromm, is not supported by what is regularly found in people. He proceeds by distinguishing between selfishness and love for oneself. The selfish individual does not love himself, nor does he love others. It is the powerless, helpless individual who is selfish. Selfishness has its basis in self-hatred.

Love, as distinguished from many other phenomena, neurotic dependency and sadistic domination for example, implies care, respect, responsibility, and knowledge. "It is an active striving for the growth and happiness of the loved person, rooted in one's own capacity to love." Love for another person is based on a general capacity to love. "Not only others, but ourselves are the objects of our feelings and attitudes." If we love others, we also love ourselves; and if we do not love ourselves, we cannot love at all. Love is a primary capacity of human beings. If conditions are favorable, the child will develop predominantly this potentiality.

- 2) Impressed by the destructiveness of man in individual and social life, 1) Freud thought of destructiveness as a universal and ineradicable drive which he expressed in his theory of the instinctual nature of hate (death-instinct theory). According to this theory, our alternative is to destroy others or to destroy ourselves. He leaves open the possibility of the transformation of our destructive impulses to socially valuable behavior (sublimation).
- 2) Fromm does not accept the premise of the ineradicable evilness of human beings. He thinks of destructiveness as a secondary potentiality that develops in direct proportion to the extent to which the self-realization process is interfered with. "If man's drive to develop his sensual, emotional, and intellectual capacities is blocked, the energy directed toward life-fulfilling activities undergoes a process of reorganization and becomes directed toward destructiveness."

- He distinguishes between self-assertion, reactive hostility, and irrational hate. Self-assertion, frequently considered under the loosely used term

- aggression, has nothing to do with hostility. It is, on the contrary, one aspect of productiveness. Creative hostility emerges when one's values are threatened, and therefore differs from irrational hate, which is always ready to be discharged with or without motive. The destructive person has hate ingrained in his character. We can repeat that our attitudes toward others and toward ourselves are "conjunctive." We cannot destroy others without destroying ourselves. Self-hatred generates hatred for others.

#### SADISM AND MASOCHISM

Destructiveness has been considered by Freud and many of his followers to be the essential element in sadism and masochism. Fromm differs in his understanding of these phenomena. Both are psychic mechanisms through which a person attempts to escape from unbearable feelings of isolation and anxiety; specific ways of relating oneself to others, developed by those who have failed to achieve independence and freedom. The essential element in sadism is the need to rule over, to dominate, and to exploit others. Symbiosis is the common element in both phenomena, which are found regularly in the same person as two poles, one of which can be more apparent than the other. Fromm prefers to speak of the sado-masochistic or authoritarian character. Although both trends are frequently mixed with destructiveness (the aim of which is the elimination of the object), this association is not necessarily present.

Another important difference in this subject, between Fromm and Freud, is that Freud explained "moral" sadism and masochism as primarily sexual phenomena. Fromm explains the relationship between the "moral" and sexual aspects of the phenomena the other way around. Symbiosis, being a way of relatedness, is primarily "moral." In some cases, however, it expresses itself more openly in the sexual behavior of the individual.

#### ETHICS

Freud's explicit position in relation to values is a relativistic one. However, as Fromm has pointed out, sometimes he assumes by implication a nonrelativistic position. For instance, the "genital" character is "better" than the oral or the anal one. Freud did a valuable work in the field of ethical problems, pointing out that ethical values frequently are nothing but rationalizations of unconscious irrational drives. Fromm, while recognizing that, affirms that true ethical values exist, and that they have a vital relationship to man's self-realization and the fulfillment of his powers. All men have values and ideas, and the value judgements they make determine their actions. Neurotic symptoms are the result of moral conflicts in many instances. The "Homo Psychologicus" of Freud, as the "Homo Economicus" of Marx, are incomplete versions of man, who also is an ethical animal.

Ethics is a scientifically valid discipline if based on a knowledge of human



nature. Good is what is good for man, and man through his reason is the only one that can determine what is good or bad for him. Fromm applies psychoanalysis to ethical inquiries, and shows that it is in this field a very valuable tool. Furthermore, he considers one of the goals of psychoanalytic treatment is to teach men how to live, using their energies in the realization of the true ethical values of mankind: brotherly love, justice, freedom, rationality, etc. Following this trend of thought, Fromm opposes the concept of adaptation as a norm for mental health. If culture were always fitted to men's needs, adjustment to it would be equivalent to healthy human development, but this is not the case. We see that the greater number of individuals in a group may hold ideas that are utterly irrational, such as in the case of Nazi Germany. If a man is adjusted to a disturbed culture, he has to be considered more disturbed than the few deviates who oppose the views held by the majority. Fromm differentiates between neurosis and the "socially patterned defect." An individual suffers from a socially patterned defect when he is well adjusted to blocking and disturbed aspects of society.

#### NEUROSIS AND THE PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

- 1) Freud's views on the origin of neurosis are centered around his theory of the Oedipus' complex. The unsuccessful outcome of this universal, biologically determined situation of rivalry between the child and his father, based on the child's sexual attachment to the mother, disturbs his libidinal development and seals his destiny as a neurotic.
- 2) Although Fromm recognizes that Freud pointed in the right direction, and that most of his observations were correct (childhood sexuality, attachment to the mother, rebellion against the father), he denies the universality of the complex which, as anthropological data indicates, does not occur in societies where patriarchal authority is weak or non-existent. He is also unconvinced of the fundamental sexual nature of the child's attachment to the mother. There are several ways in which a mother can interfere with the loosening of the ties that link the child with her at the time they should be loosened. On the other hand, in patriarchal societies, the authoritarian father uses his irrational authority to break the will, spontaneity, and independence of the child, and thus inhibits his development. Sex plays a role in some cases when the mother actively stimulates the sexuality of the child, and when the forbidding attitude of the parents in the area of infantile sexual expression is prominent. The defeat of the child in his struggle against his parents, whose interests are opposed to his, does not necessarily lead to neurosis. It can lead to a socially patterned defect.

#### CONCLUSION

Few developments in the field of psychoanalysis have attracted as much attention in America and abroad as the theories of Erich Fromm. Some of the

reasons for this are, first, that in utilizing a philosophical-anthropological concept of man, he has developed a theoretical framework that allows for a more flexible and inclusive psychoanalytic approach to the understanding of human personality. Second, he has enriched psychoanalytic thinking with a wealth of significant data from the fields of philosophy and the social sciences, where he has continued in and extended the humanistic tradition. Third, he is an original thinker who has studied Freud critically and has reinterpreted him, differentiating between his factual discoveries and his theoretical conceptions.

In Fromm's theoretical framework, the relationship of man and society is a dynamically interactive one. Culture has not only a repressive, but also a creative role. He adds an historical perspective where economic and ideological forces can be adequately considered. Instincts are not ignored in the understanding of the total personality, but they are not considered the main problem of psychology. It becomes the chief task of psychology to understand how man relates specifically to his personal and impersonal world and to himself.

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