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Erich Fromm:

Man's Search for Freedom

*by Peter Anthony Bertocci and Richard Marion Millard
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In Erich Fromm (born 1900) we find a psychoanalyst who, profiting from the work of Freud, Jung, Adler, Horney, and others, takes the first positive, articulate, and systematic step into the realm of ethics and social problems. His orientation to human existence is not so much medical as it is sociological and philosophical. He moves constantly from an analysis of man in his basic relation to nature and society to what he believes man and society *ought* to become. But—and this is the all-important theoretical step which none of his predecessors took explicitly—on Fromm's view, man cannot be what he ought to be unless he becomes what he really is.

In three successive books, *Escape from Freedom* (1941), *Man for Himself* (1947), *The Sane Society* (1955), and then in a summary, *The Art of Loving* (1956), one can almost see the movement of Fromm's thought from (a) an analysis of man's status as a free being to (b) the nature of the good that man can find only in himself to (c) the kind of society that will at once develop from, and encourage, the most creative use of freedom. But we shall better understand the total outlook of Fromm and gain more perspective on the ground we have covered thus far in this book, if we stop here to contrast his perspective on man and morality with that of a great tradition.



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I. MAN, THE ETHICAL IDEAL, AND RELIGION

For the majority of mankind, East and West, the ethical life calls for *conformity* of human behavior to some Agency or agencies beyond man. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, as exemplified in the stories of Adam and Eve and Moses' reception on Mt. Sinai the Commandments of God, we see an underlying pattern illustrated. On this view, God creates man (unlike animals) in his own image and puts Eden at his disposal. The one condition exacted of man is obedience to God's command, whether or not man understands the reasons for it. When he disobeys God, he forfeits the joys of Eden and is made to work for his livelihood. When man does not offer his best to God and when he accepts no responsibility for being his brother's keeper, as the story of Cain and Abel teaches, he is disobeying the will of God.

In all this, the dominant pattern—and one repeated in other traditions—is that man finds his good not by consulting human nature, but by knowing and heeding the will of God as God chooses to reveal it to man. We shall not enter here into the different theological interpretations and refinements of the relation between God, Nature, and man. For there is no doubt that it is this simple, crude, yet clear-cut notion that has lent itself more than any other to easy understanding and acceptance by Jews and Christians. But it is this notion that Fromm is to reject. It is the notion, to repeat, that the good life is something superimposed on man, that man must live under the judgment of a Being, call him Father or not, who demands obedience from man's nature at any cost as the condition for man's security and happiness, both in this life and the next.

This conviction that the good life is to be lived under the guidance of God has been supported by other convictions as to how God made his ways known to man. The dominant tradition has been that man could be aware of God through religious faith or that God revealed himself to men of faith. In the Jewish tradition, this meant that God made his will known through leaders like Moses, Abraham, and Isaiah; and in the basic Christian tradition this line of revelation continued into the life of Jesus, the supreme and final revelation of God's will for man. The underlying assumption in such views is that man can both know God's will and be aided by

God to do it. The act of "faith" is not a "simple-minded" act of credulity. "Faith" is a kind of knowing and doing in which the believer affirms, attests, and enjoys a sense of comradeship with God the Father. The moral ideal is grounded in God and is revealed in the life of faith.

There have been influential thinkers, however, who explained the authority of moral ideals in man's life in a different way. Granting that the authority of the good life rested ultimately on God's nature, thinkers like Joseph Butler (1692–1752) and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), believed that man knows the moral ideal not by way of a revealing act of faith but by way of a unique moral consciousness or conscience. A man's conscience, the final arbiter in his life, of right and wrong, is what it is because, in the last analysis, it is the presence of God's command in him. Man's "I ought . . ." is ultimately God's "Thou shalt . . ."

There are different versions of the exact nature of this moral consciousness, and we shall deal with them in further detail in Chapters 9, 10, and 11. For our purposes here it is important to bear in mind that, on these views, the conscience, or moral consciousness is a way of knowing what man ought to do *but without consulting man's needs or desires or abilities*. Just as the senses as such do not consult man's needs or desires in becoming aware of a physical world, so the moral *sense* or the *moral reason* becomes aware of commands to which the rest of life is subject. It is felt (and it is argued) that man is responsible for the moral ideal of which he becomes aware regardless of what he wishes, needs, or desires, and regardless of whether he can do what the moral ideal commands.

Now it will be evident to the reader of these pages so far that, with the possible exception of Jung, this particular approach to man and morality is either neglected or ignored, when it is not explicitly denied. There are various reasons, but we may speak of two here.

II. MAN, THE MORAL IDEAL, AND SCIENTIFIC METHOD

First, as we have seen, the psychoanalytic approach to mental health followed the lead-lines of medicine and biological research. By the time Freud began theorizing, the evolutionary conception of man was already assumed to be true in the scientific and scholarly



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world. Man was seen as a biological development having much in common with the animal world, not *with God*. If man is made in any image, it is the image of the higher animal rather than the image of God. The physiologist who wanted to discover what makes the human body work as it does has no need to make use of the idea of God. To believe in, or to deny, God is not important to a person who is tracing the route of a stimulus through the nervous system. In such a task, a physiologist gets more help from considering man's relation to animals than by thinking of him as a somewhat tarnished image of God. Seeing how his experimental animals respond to his probings will give him clues as to what goes on in man under similar conditions, but it seems obvious that his belief or unbelief in God is hardly relevant to such investigation.

Biology and medical science, accordingly, made the assumption that one does not heal a body by prayer to an external God, but by understanding the cause and effect relationships within the body and between the body and the external world. Thus, when Freud, the doctor, approached the problem of mental healing and health, it was understandable (whatever other reasons might be given) that he should make no appeal to the religious life of persons. Indeed, we have seen that he explained religion as an outworn and dangerous defense mechanism. The "living faith" in God, he held, is an "illusion" better outgrown.

Similarly, conscience and the feeling of obligation got no recognition at all in Freud's earliest theorizing. Later, as the superego, conscience became the internalized monitor not of the will of God but of the will of society as channeled through parental training. And in Freud's thinking we have already noted the faith that if only one could have insight into himself in relation to physical Nature and to other human beings, there would be adequate basis for mental health. For Freud the sources of the good life are within human nature, a nature untrammled and unhampered either by Jungian ancestral archetypes or Greek, Jewish, or Christian convictions that the highest human living is in some sense an image of the Structure of Reality. This whole mode of approach, we suggest, came as an extension of the biological outlook on man's development and behavior.

Closely allied to this outlook was a second intellectual attitude to which the growth of biological science is itself traceable, namely, a *scientistic* attitude toward truth. We are purposely using the word

"scientistic" because we do not believe that "scientistic" and "scientific" mean the same thing, or that *scientism* is the same as *science*. The scientific way of answering any question or solving any problem is to develop theories or hypotheses that not only are consistent with the evidence at hand, but are confirmed by further evidence. In general, when a scientist wants to know what follows what, he develops an hypothesis suggested by the data he has and then goes on to set up an experiment over whose different factors he has sufficient control to discover whether the situation works out as it should if his hypothesis is true.

Why is the scientist never satisfied with hypotheses held to be true on any other grounds? Because in the *ideal* experiment two things happen. First, as we have just said, he can so control the factors involved that he can tell whether the outcome is the particular result he predicted. Second, what takes place in the experiment is open not only to his own gaze but also to the inspection of others. It is understandable that the scientist as a truth-seeker would prefer public evidence achieved through the repetitive control of experimentation. His assurance of "true" hypotheses will depend on how close he can come to such sensory, public, controlled evidence in confirmation of his hypotheses. Who would deny this ideal of truth?

But we must still distinguish the scientistic from the scientific attitude. Some scientists and philosophers have decided to restrict scientific research *only* to questions whose answers can be checked by sensory and, therefore, public observation. They would even restrict the words "true" and "false" to hypotheses thus checked or in principle checkable. Now such a sensory method of acquiring truth and such a sensory test of truth applies best wherever the processes that take place occur in space. This "sensory" scientific method has been applied especially effectively in physics and chemistry, but not so effectively in geology and astronomy because experimentation with celestial bodies and with millennial changes is impossible. In biology, although the processes go on in space and are observable in principle by the senses, experimental control is much more difficult to achieve.

Actually, in all these sciences—chemistry, physics, geology, astronomy, biology—hypotheses are sometimes developed and accepted that have not been confirmed by actual experimentation. Yet the evidence for the hypotheses is sensory; or the hypothesis is assumed to be checkable by sensory, public observation once adequate tech-



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niques are developed. Thus, hypotheses about the other side of the moon or about biological genes, accepted because they are most consistent with sensory data, have not yet been checked by sensory observation (although photographs have now been taken of the moon, and many believe that the electron microscope has "photographed" genes). Actually, insofar as biology rests on chemical and physical processes it has the weight of the strictest sort of scientific procedure behind it. But as biological processes become more complicated, especially in man, it is simply impossible either to develop or to check hypotheses provable on a purely sensory and public basis. Some types of blindness, paralysis, ulcers, and other ailments do not yield entirely to hypotheses supported wholly by sensory data.

In fact, there are theorists, called vitalists, who believe that being alive even as a plant or an amoeba involves activities that are not observable by sense. The biological evidence does not yield to one easily acceptable hypothesis about the nature of living processes.¹ And, as we suggested in the first chapter, the mind-body problem is always present to harass scientific psychologists. Nevertheless, the whole approach to man and morality has been much affected by this scientific approach to truth. If scientific thinkers had their way, the only processes anyone, even the psychologist, should study, the only answers he should consider true, would be those open to public, sensory tests.

It must be emphasized, however, that while Freud, Jung, Adler, and Horney have not been systematically clear about the mind-body problem, they have all developed hypotheses by no means checkable by sense or public observation. Their appeal in support of these hypotheses has been to such phenomena as *resistance*, *anxiety*, *feelings of inferiority and insecurity*, which are certainly not known by eye, ear, nose, or any other sense. Today, however, the resistance of scientific psychologists to such hypotheses resembles the resistance to Freud by medical men when he urged that the *libido* and non-sensory psychic processes like *repression* be taken seriously even if they could not be observed by the senses. Had Freud given in to scientific scholars, there would probably be no psychosomatic medicine. That there is indicates that many scientific minds have not been willing to force themselves or reality into what they felt was

¹ See, for example, Charles Scott Sherrington, *Man on His Nature* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1951), and Edmund W. Sinnott, *Cell and Psyche* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1950).

scientific dogma. For such scientific minds the problem is always to gather as carefully as possible all the evidence relevant to the particular problem, and not to worry particularly about whether it can be sensed or not. At the same time, scientific minds grant to scientific minds that the truth on which there can be most agreement is that unearthed by controlled experimentation and checkable by sense experience.

To be more specific, what we have witnessed in the psychotherapist is greater concern for the problem he is trying to solve than for a preferred type of evidence. Jung's theory of archetypes in a collective unconscious is surely the hardest to check by sensory processes; for Freud's id and superego, Adler's need of superiority, Horney's demand for "self-security," there will be no sensory check and there is little strictly experimental data (in the scientific meaning). However, if these investigators, as they tried to understand mental illness were unwilling to be restricted by scientific dogma and this scientific climate, their training in medicine kept them closer to biological modes of thinking than to the religious and the philosophical. While they have made some hundred-yard dashes into speculative concepts like *the libido*, *the personal and collective unconscious*, they have resisted hypotheses that smacked of hoary philosophical "speculation" or other-worldly religious faith.

The importance of these developments—and we have barely sketched them—has been far-reaching for ethical theory and for the theory of man and the universe. Only the future will tell to what the different paths in the great debate over methodology will lead. We have purposely chosen in this book to begin not with philosophical and religious view of the good life, but with the scientific-scientific perspectives of psychotherapists who give a wide berth to such philosophical and religious presuppositions as special rational, moral, aesthetic, or religious sensitivities.

There have been, of course, great philosophical movements that join in refusing to accept moral-religious "insights" into the universe. No lesser thinkers than Democritus, Epicurus, Hobbes, Condorcet, Comte, Marx, Santayana, and Dewey have denied any affinity between the highest in man and the Cosmos. They have affirmed instead that moral ideals are the outgrowth of human experience criticized by (some form of) reasoning. Because they deny any superhuman Agency, Realm, or Purpose to which something in man bears witness, and because they hope through the scientific-philosophical



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sophical study of man and Nature to discover the ideal program of moral and social action, these thinkers are called *Humanists* (as opposed to Superhumanists) and *Naturalists* (as opposed to Supernaturalists), or, better, *Naturalistic Humanists*.

In *Man for Himself* and *The Sane Society*, Erich Fromm, who calls the society he advocates a Humanistic Communitarian Socialism, stands within this tradition, and he comes to it mainly on the strength of psychoanalysis and sociology, although Spinoza, in particular, as well as Marx and Hegel have had considerable influence. In him, as we have said, we shall find the most systematic and self-conscious attempt to put psychological science to work in developing an adequate theory of human goodness. We shall not try to expound his (still sketchy) ethics as such here, but shall restrict ourselves largely to his theory of human nature and the conditions that man must fulfill if he is to realize his potential.

III. MAN'S PROBLEM AS FROMM SEES IT

We may state the human problem in Fromm's own words:

What is essential in the existence of man is the fact that he has emerged from the animal kingdom, from instinctive adaptation, that he has transcended nature—although he never leaves it; he is part of it—and yet once torn away from nature, he cannot return to it; once thrown out of paradise—a state of original oneness with nature—cherubim with flaming swords block his way, if he should try to return.²

Here we note immediately that man is embedded in nature; he issues from an "original oneness with nature" and is not created by God; nor is he driven from nature as Adam and Eve were from the Garden of Eden in a fallen state of sin. And he may not return, ever, to paradise.

Man, then, has somehow "emerged" from Nature. But, in thus emerging, he emancipated himself "from the original animal harmony with nature" and thus has a different problem from that of animals. Interestingly enough, the author of *Genesis* I had also

² *The Art of Loving* (World Perspectives, Vol. 9, ed. Ruth A. Anshen; New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), p. 7. Copyright © 1956 by Erich Fromm. Reprinted by permission of Harper & Row, Publishers.

noted that man is different from animals; he explained the difference by saying that this creature did not represent something new in the universe, but was made in the image of God. The contrast is complete: Man in the *Genesis* view could converse with God in the cool of the evening and be guided by him; man on Fromm's naturalistic view finds himself different from the animal, *freer* than the animal, but also more bewildered. Thus Fromm says: "Man can only go forward by developing his reason, by finding a new harmony, a human one, instead of the prehuman harmony which is irretrievably lost."³ The whole hope of the Old and New Testament is that man, though driven from the Garden of Eden because of his free disobedience, may return to and live once more in fellowship with God, and do this with the help of God. But as Fromm puts it: "When man is born, the human race as well as the individual, he is thrown out of a situation which was definite, as definite as the instincts, into a situation which is indefinite, uncertain and open. There is certainty only about the past—and about the future only as far as that it is death."⁴

In this passage and many others we find Fromm turning away from the definiteness of Freud's libido and the fairly fixed modes of libidinous expression in oral, anal, and heterosexual development. In other words, although Fromm grants that man has inherited physiological responses, he denies any directive instinctive structure. About all man has left of his past is at best a psychic yearning to return to this primordial safety. Thus Fromm clearly severs the umbilical cord uniting psychoanalysis and biologically rooted instinct. He is almost as firm in this as he is in rejecting *Genesis*. In what situation, then, does this leave man?

In a graphic statement Fromm asserts:

Man is gifted with reason; he is *life being aware of itself*; he has awareness of himself, of his fellow man, of his past, and of the possibilities of his future. This awareness of himself as a separate entity, the awareness of his own short life span, of the fact that without his will he is born and against his will he dies, that he will die before those whom he loves, or they before him, the awareness of his aloneness and separateness, of his helplessness before the forces of nature and of society, all this makes his sep-

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.



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arate, disunited existence an unbearable prison. He would become insane could he not liberate himself from this prison and reach out, unite himself in some form or other with men, with the world outside. . . .

The experience of separateness arouses anxiety; it is, indeed, the source of all anxiety. Being separate means being cut off, without any capacity to use my *human powers*. Hence to be separate means to be helpless, unable to grasp the world—things and people—actively; it means that the world can invade me without my ability to react. Thus separateness is the source of intense anxiety. . . .

The deepest need of man, then, is the need to overcome his separateness, to leave the prison of his aloneness. The *absolute* failure to achieve this aim means insanity.⁵

From such passages and others it soon becomes clear that Fromm does not think of anxiety in Horney's way, as a response to hostility arising out of one's feeling of helplessness especially in childhood. Anxiety is an experience forever present in man's life because there will never be a time when man can overcome the conditions that make him feel alone in nature or strange or separate. The problem in man's life is to overcome this separateness and to do it forthrightly and productively. One could succeed in overcoming "the panic of complete isolation" ⁶ by withdrawing so far from the world in one's mind that the world from which one is separated disappears. But this is insanity. Thus, every man's life might, as it were, be plotted by the degree to which he moves from such complete withdrawal to the stage of union with Nature and fellowmen that Fromm calls *productive*.

For there is another side of this picture, which, as thus far depicted, seems so grim. Man is separated, yes, but this also means that man is free from preordained instinctive patterns of behavior. The very same powers that cause anxiety are those that make men free to discover what *he* as an individual is, free to know how he can relate himself to others, free from being pushed, free to plan "the belonging" without which he feels so destitute. But in this

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 8, 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

process of finding freedom man is a pilgrim whose progress is impeded by many obstacles, the greatest of which is the social milieu into which he is born but in which he must discover the nature of his real freedom. Let us see how the child's problem grows.

As a member of the human species the infant is already free from the bonds that give an animal security. Every step of growth is a step that makes more freedom possible, yet at the same time reduces security. For the steps in the direction of separation are not matched by a nicely balanced corresponding power that allows for harmony and assurance. Anxiety resulting from isolation is thus built into the human situation, for the child does not relinquish security-giving "primary ties" easily. It is in this condition that the family, the representative of the prevailing social structure, has the greatest influence in the life of the child. For the child, as he reaches for union on the one hand and is carried along the path of individuation on the other, develops his basic personality within this environment.

It is much too simple to say that the child is molded by the social pattern or that the child simply selects according to his need and ability. For the child is always growing and the problem is always changing, reflecting the kind of relationship that is established from day to day. Nevertheless, it seems quite safe to say that Fromm allows the environment much more power in the shaping of personality than do Freud, Jung, Adler, or even Horney. Thus he says: "Those drives which make for the *differences* in men's characters, like love and hatred, the lust for power and the yearning for submission, the enjoyment of sensuous pleasure and the fear of it, are all products of the social process."⁷

Fromm, in short, sees that the individual who has lost his primary ties may well be all the more tempted to find security by escaping from his freedom into a safe conformity with family, social groups, and the larger economic and political structure. But when the person becomes dependent on approval and tends to conform, he still feels insecure and anxious, and he uses his energy to compensate for or cover up his anxiety.⁸ If one were looking for the "mortal sins"

⁷ Patrick Mullahy, *Oedipus, Myth and Complex* (New York: Hermitage Press, 1952), p. 242. From Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1941), p. 12.

⁸ See *The Sane Society* (New York: Rinehart, 1955), p. 271. Copyright © 1955 by Erich Fromm. Subsequent quotations from this work are reprinted by permission of Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.



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in Fromm's analysis, he would turn to the catalogue of "escapes" from freedom which Fromm elaborately develops but which we can only mention here.

IV. ESCAPES FROM FREEDOM

Much of Fromm's writing is a description of how, in the individual's struggle to find the right solution to these conflicting needs for union and freedom, he is shaped by the prevailing economic, political, and philosophic trends of his times. These various "orientations," to use Fromm's word, a person can develop in dealing with his problem of freedom. For example, there is the person who is so anxious to be loved, so fearful of disapproval and lonesomeness, that he will "take anything" from those he depends upon. In direct contrast to such a "masochistic" orientation is that of the "sadist." This person dominates and exploits others for the same reason—that he may ensure not being separate or alone.

But Fromm's work is distinguished not so much by his analysis of such "unproductive orientations," which most of us recognize as being abnormal. He skillfully points out that much that is considered normal in the western world, and especially in an industrialized capitalistic democracy like America, does in fact turn its back on productivity. Thus, the person who wants to be stylish, who abhors being different, is actually an "automaton conformist." Or, if he is a "good mixer" and "sociable" and finds happiness in the things or people he has met, he may actually have developed a "receptive character." That is, he has disguised his insecurity by surrounding himself with things and people—as if he expected his happiness to come from circumstances outside himself, be it friends, gadgets, or God.

The "hoarding character," on the other hand, has little faith in anything or anybody outside of himself. He protects himself against insecurity by hoarding what he has; he demands a punctual and orderly world as a protection against his own fear of not being able to set things right.

And those persons who are always "selling" their personalities, making sure that they adapt to every new demand, actually illustrate the "marketing orientation" for they have given up their self-direc-

tion for safety. To the "marketing" personality, both other persons and they themselves are in fact commodities, things, to be used in exchanges that are useful and safe.

V. THE AUTHORITARIAN VERSUS THE HUMANISTIC CONSCIENCE

In all these "unproductive orientations" there is a common factor: the individual has sought to replace his primary ties not by cultivating his own nature but by finding and accepting some source of authority outside his own life. For Fromm, any person who regulates himself by standards that are external is escaping from freedom—with resulting self-distortion and loss of self-confidence. Indeed, Fromm dramatizes this battle by distinguishing two types of conscience at war with each other in the individual's life.

The *authoritarian conscience* is the internalization of external authority. When a person with an authoritarian conscience says that his conscience feels good, he really means that he feels secure in pleasing external authority and avoiding punishment or rejection. When he has a "guilty conscience," he is feeling insecure because he has offended authority and fears the threat of being rejected. His authoritarian conscience does not tolerate insubordination; it demands "all or none" intellectual and emotional submission. The person whom it rules feels sinful if he questions it or if he asks for its justification.

Fromm thinks that the notion of God in the Judeo-Christian tradition fits this authoritarian conscience, because God's authority is not to be doubted and his will is not subject to rational understanding. Any person whose authoritarian conscience allows him to bow and scrape subservient before any "transcending" authority, be it God or society, loses his productivity.⁹ If he perchance asserts himself, he feels guilty, this guilt reawakening his primary desires for protective security.

But this side of the person's struggle, solidified in the anonymous authoritarian conscience, is not all there is to being human. Escape from freedom, yes, but that is not all. For a child is not "born to be broken" or to be an automaton. The child, even, puts up a fight to

⁹ See *Man for Himself* (New York: Rinehart, 1947), pp. 141 ff.



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be a "fullfledged human being." ¹⁰ So important is this struggle that Fromm says: "The scars left from the child's defeat in the fight against irrational authority are to be found at the bottom of every neurosis." ¹¹ The story will be different if a child gradually learns to free himself from irrational authority and to link his life in responsible and understandable devotion to his own fulfillment and that of others.

At this point we may well ask: But is not Fromm pointing to another dimension in human nature? He is indeed. Working quite clearly from an ideal of what a "really" wholesome or good personality should be, he condemns as "unproductive" any personality ruled either by a Freudian conscience or socialized superego or by a conscience viewed as the voice of God. What Fromm now introduces, without blare of bugle or sound of trumpet, is a motivating force in each person that links him with every man's struggle for freedom everywhere. He calls it the productive or humanistic conscience. There is no understanding of Fromm's view of the dynamics of personality without the realization that he has this ideal of productivity in the back of his mind even when he does not refer to it or when he uses different names for it.

Yet, if we asked why the individual should not seek security and fatten on it (even as Horney, in the main, seems to suggest), what would Fromm say? He would insist that the individual must (ought to?) follow what his intrinsic human nature is. We shall understand Fromm better if we look at this humanistic conscience more carefully.

The "humanistic conscience is not the internalized voice of an authority whom we are eager to please and afraid of displeasing. It is our own voice, present in every human being and independent of external sanction and reward." ¹² The word "voice" here is metaphorical, of course, even though it reappears on the next page when Fromm, still seeking to define the humanistic conscience says: "It is the voice of our true selves (not of God or society) which summons us back to ourselves, to live productively, to develop fully and harmoniously—that is, to *become what we potentially are.*" ¹³

What Fromm seems to have in mind is the struggle that any liv-

¹⁰ Erich Fromm, "Conscience," in Ruth Anshen (ed.), *Moral Principles of Action* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952), p. 188.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

ing being puts up in order to be what it is its nature to be—except that Fromm seems to assume that it is our true nature to be harmonious. Again, he says: "It is the reaction of our total personality to its proper functioning or disfunctioning." ¹⁴ Thus, the humanistic conscience seems to be the self-assertion of the "true self" to become what it can be, rather than accept, for safety's sake, any externally imposed alternative.

Stated differently, Fromm is actually saying that *human nature is so constituted* that it sets up its own demand, namely, that its own potentialities be realized totally and harmoniously. The humanistic conscience is that which in each of our natures calls us to the best *we* can be; it demands that, whatever the terms Nature and other men set down, our own abilities and needs be heeded. And the price a man pays for not heeding it is unproductiveness, however much safety he may feel. If "we listen to every voice and to everybody but not to ourselves," ¹⁵ if we never take time to be alone and learn to listen to our *true* self-interest, we shall indeed be afraid to die—for *we* have never lived.

But why is there this impoverishment if one does not obey the humanistic conscience? Why is this better than the authoritarian conscience? Ultimately Fromm seems to have postulated a kind of power-making-for-freedom as intrinsic to human nature. In *Man for Himself*, he appeals to the principle that "*the power to act creates a need to use this power and that the failure to use it results in dysfunction and unhappiness.*" ¹⁶ But it is not yet clear what "unhappiness" is, what "dysfunctioning" is. Some conception of what human nature ought to be seems to guide Fromm in his definition of human nature. At the same time, he seems to be developing his conception of happiness by what he thinks is constitutive of human nature. We need to look into this matter further.

It seems clear that for Fromm the "ought," the ideal, is present in some fashion within what he regards as the lasting, most dependable trends of each human being. And what are these? Those he shares with all humanity. The command is: "Be thyself, and as completely as possible!" To be one's *true* self is to allow what is not yet actual to become real. And, it is contended, a person cannot do so if he

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

¹⁶ We owe this to Ruth Munroe, *Schools of Psychoanalytic Thought* (New York: Dryden Press, 1955), p. 465, who gets it from *Man for Himself* (New York: Rinehart, 1947), p. 219.



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simply conforms. As Fromm puts it in *The Sane Society*: "Conscience by its very nature is nonconforming; . . . Conscience exists only when man experiences himself as man, not as a thing, as a commodity." ¹⁷

What happens when this humanistic conscience makes itself felt? The answer: A person "senses his gifts or talents, his ability to love, to think, to laugh, to cry, to wonder and to create, he senses that his life is the one chance he is given, and that if he loses this chance he has lost everything." ¹⁸

The critical reader may well ask: But why is the more lasting and the more universal in man better than what is not? Why ought a man to follow what he has in common with others? These questions never receive an answer. Fromm does not explain why a universal trend in basic human nature ought to be the standard.

This raises a crucial question that many moralists have raised, one that we must raise again later. Can what man *ought to be* ever be completely derived from *any* description of what he *is* and *has been*? Fromm seems simply to have assumed that because certain trends can be found in all people, the standard "ought" should be found in what is found in all people, the standard "ought" should be found in what is thus universal to man. Clearly there are other questions to be raised.

VI. THE PRODUCTIVE PERSONALITY

Such questions aside, in relation to the views thus far expressed, Fromm articulates a conception of happiness and mental health that runs somewhat as follows: "The aim of life," he says, "is to unfold man's love and reason and . . . every other human activity has to be subordinated to this aim." ¹⁹ Fromm distinguishes between reason and intelligence. Intelligence is the ability by which we work out our biological survival; it is the process of manipulating ideas and things so that we solve practical problems. Reason, on the other hand, "aims at understanding; it tries to find out what is behind the surface, to recognize the kernel, the essence of the reality which sur-

¹⁷ *The Sane Society*, p. 173.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

rounds us; . . . its function is not to further physical as much as mental and spiritual existence." ²⁰

But reason cannot function adequately without "relatedness and a sense of self." ²¹ Indeed, it is such reason that is missing in "alienated man." For he "takes his reality for granted" and therefore "wants to eat it, touch it, manipulate it," ²² rather than think creatively about the underlying meaning, "which cannot be eaten or manipulated."

Clearly an extraordinary conception of a "happy person" is emerging in this ideal of a creative person. One thing is sure. A "happy" person can never be "secure." As Fromm puts it:

How can a sensitive and alive person ever feel secure? Because of the very conditions of our existence, we cannot feel secure about anything. Our thoughts and insights are at best partial truth; . . . our life and health are subject to accidents beyond our control. If we make a decision, we can never be certain of the outcome; any decision implies a risk of failure, and if it does imply it, it has not been a decision in the true sense of the word. We can never be certain of the outcome of our best efforts. The result always depends on many factors which transcend our capacity of control. Just as a sensitive and alive person cannot avoid being sad, he cannot avoid feeling insecure. The psychic task which a person can and must set for himself, is *not to feel secure, but to be able to tolerate insecurity, without panic and undue fear.* . . . [again]: *Free man is by necessity insecure; thinking man by necessity uncertain.* ²³

This insistence on the importance of tolerating insecurity, in fact, is the background for Fromm's rigorous condemnation of "many writers" in psychiatry and psychoanalysis who "postulate security as the main aim of psychic development and consider a sense of security more or less equivalent with mental health." ²⁴ He even condemns H. S. Sullivan, "the most profound and searching" ²⁵ of these

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, p. 171.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

²⁵ *Ibid.* See H. S. Sullivan, *Conception of Modern Psychiatry* (Washington: William Alanson White Psychiatric Foundation, 1948); *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry*, ed. Helen S. Perry and Mary L. Gawel (New York: Norton, 1953); and Patrick Mulhaly, *Oedipus, Myth and Complex*, Chapter X.



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writers." If "being happy" is identified with "having a good time" or being free from sorrow or sadness, then he insists that this "consumer attitude" is far from the experience of fullness, of self-discovery, of union with others. One other excerpt will bring out the essential thrust of his position:

From the standpoint of normative humanism [note] we must arrive at a different concept of mental health; the very person who is considered healthy in the categories of an alienated world, from the humanistic standpoint appears as the sickest one—although not in terms of individual sickness, but of the socially patterned defect. Mental health, in the humanistic sense, is characterized by the emergence from the incestuous ties to family and nature, by a sense of identity based on one's experience of self as the subject and agent of one's powers, by the grasp of reality inside and outside of ourselves, that is, by the development of objectivity and reason. The aim of life is to live it intensely, to be fully born, to be fully awake. . . . To be able to be alone, and at the same time one with a loved person, with every brother on this earth, with all that is alive; to follow the voice of our conscience, the voice that calls us to ourselves, yet not to indulge in self hate when the voice of conscience was not loud enough to be heard and followed. The mentally healthy person is the person who lives by love, reason, and faith, who respects life, his own and that of his fellowman. . . . The alienated person . . . cannot be healthy.²⁶

VII. PRODUCTIVE LOVE

The reader will already have guessed that "the art of loving" is the parallel to the life of reason. Here again the problem is for the individual to grow beyond the immature narcissistic state of wanting to be loved, to grow away from wanting to be loved simply for what he is. "Infantile love follows the principle: *'I love because I am loved.'* Mature love follows the principle: *'I am loved because I love.'* Immature love says: *'I love you because I need you.'* Mature love says: *'I need you because I love you.'*"²⁷

²⁶ *The Sane Society*, pp. 203-4.

²⁷ *Art of Loving*, pp. 40-41.

For Fromm (we must stop to comment), love goes much further than mature heterosexual relations, as of course it did for Freud. But the need to love beyond sexual dimensions is for Fromm integral to human nature, whereas for Freud it was a sublimation of the libido. Love for Fromm is the search for union of a creative sort; its purpose is to protect both one's own potential and growth and that of the other person or persons. Again, productive love is giving and not receiving, a giving born of respect and understanding of the other.

It is in this context that Freud is criticized for not seeing that "the sexual desire is one manifestation of the need for love and union."²⁸ But Freud is even more wrong in thinking of the sexual desire as "the result of a chemically produced tension in the body,"²⁹ which, being painful, must seek removal in sexual gratification. Indeed, Freud is not wrong so much because he overemphasized sex; he is wrong in "his failure to understand sex deeply enough."³⁰ Sexual love is rather the "craving for complete fusion, for union with one other person."³¹

VIII. TO BECOME HUMAN, LOVE!

We see now that Fromm has come full circle and suggested his answer to the problem of man. To begin with, man is free, frightened, and faint because of his reasoning capacity and his loss of fixed instinctive adaptation. But if he will use reason and not mere intelligence, if he will love and not just seek to be loved, he will solve the problem of his existence productively.

It may seem curious that words like "union" and "fusion" are used to characterize productive love in its different aspects. Such words are used by many mystics, Christian and non-Christian, who speak of becoming one with God, or with the One, or the Ultimate. In the typical, nonmystical Judeo-Christian tradition, it is love that "unified" God and man, but the relation is not conceived as fusion or union except metaphorically or poetically. God and his children are to be unified in purpose, but not in being. Fromm, as we saw earlier, rejected this theistic view of God because he thinks it must

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

P.A. Bertocci and R.M. Millard: Personality and the Good, NY 1963



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involve an externally imposed authority as the basis for human ethics. We must note, however, that while rejecting any view of man as the image of God, he clearly affirms an inner kinship between men because they are one with all there is.

Thus here he says: "Erotic love, if it is love, has one premise. That I love from the essence of my being—and experience the other person in the essence of his or her being."⁸² And Fromm goes on: "In essence, all human beings are identical. We are all part of One; we are One. This being so, it should not make any difference whom we love. Love should be essentially an act of will, of decision to commit my life completely to that of one other person."⁸³ But fearful lest love conceived as an act of will might make it a matter of indifference whom we love erotically, Fromm stresses: "We are all One—yet every one of us is a unique, unduplicatable entity,"⁸⁴ and therefore, although we are to love all persons in a brotherly way, "erotic love requires certain specific, highly individual elements which exist between some people but not between them all."⁸⁵

Thus it is that Fromm would try to keep productive freedom in willed love and at the same time emphasize an element which knits all men together. Love in this sense carries a step further the relatedness that reason seeks. In loving alone can we "really know" the essence of man and the universe.⁸⁶

Thus it is that the words "love" and "self-love" take on deep significance in Fromm. For in all his writing he contends that although we seem to start life as encapsulated, narcissistic beings, from the beginning we also feel lost ties. Our problem is to overcome human separateness and fulfill our longing for union not by alienating ourselves from our deepest selves, but by *loving ourselves* enough and thus moving into productive relationships with others and nature. Our reason will lead our freedom into relatedness; and if we love ourselves we shall be drawn into union with all others in whatever degree respects this situation and person. In short, persons are not selfish because they love themselves too much; they are selfish because they cannot love themselves as people who can and need to love.⁸⁷ The mature person loves other persons in the process of

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 55–56.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁸⁷ Cf. *Art of Loving*, pp. 57 ff., and *Man for Himself*, Chapter IV.

being his complete self, for this is what it means to be fully human.

Indeed, it is this conception of love that guides Fromm in his analysis of religious love. As we have seen, he moves along Freudian lines when he says that the God of Judeo-Christian monotheism is the product of immature thinking and feeling.

The God of Abraham can be loved, or feared, as a father, sometimes his forgiveness, sometimes his anger being the dominant aspect. Inasmuch as God is the father, I am the child. I have not emerged fully from the autistic wish for omniscience and omnipotence. . . . [On the other hand], the truly religious person . . . does not pray for anything, does not expect anything from God; he does not love God as a child loves his father or mother. [Indeed], he has acquired the humility of sensing his limitations, to a degree of knowing that he knows nothing about God. . . . He has faith in the principles which "God" represents; he thinks truth, lives love and justice, and considers all of his life only valuable inasmuch as it gives him the chance to arrive at an ever fuller unfolding of his human powers.⁸⁸

The word "God," it is evident, has now undergone a transformation too. For the Fromm who earlier said that the premise of love is the individual's being a part of One now says that to love God is "to long for the attainment of the full capacity to love, for the realization of that which 'God' stands for *in oneself*."⁸⁹

The essence of Fromm's interpretation of religion seems to be condensed in a parallel that he draws between love of parents and love of God. The child, Fromm says, moves from attachment to mother as "all-enveloping love" to father as "guiding principle for thought and action" and finally to the mature stage of establishing "the motherly and fatherly principles in himself." He thus becomes "his own father and mother."⁴⁰

In the history of the human race we see—and can anticipate—the same development: from the beginning of the love for God as the helpless attachment to a Mother Goddess, through the obedient attachment to a fatherly God, to a mature stage where God ceases to be an outside power, where man has incorporated

⁸⁸ *Art of Loving*, pp. 70–71.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 71 (italics added).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 81.



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the principles of love and justice into himself, where he has become one with God, and eventually to a point where he speaks of God only in a poetic, symbolic sense.⁴¹

If the religious ideal is condemned because it keeps man from deepest self-reliance, one can expect any social system to be condemned insofar as it keeps man from becoming his full self. We do not need to spell out Fromm's barbed critique of dictatorial fascism and communistic socialism and capitalistic democracy. For we can readily see why he would criticize each system to the extent that it puts a premium upon conformism and discourages that faith in one's own creative core that is the source of faithfulness to others. On Fromm's view, man can save himself only by creating a "sane society" in which "man relates to man lovingly, in which he is rooted in bonds of brotherliness and solidarity, . . . in which everyone gains a sense of self by experiencing himself as the subject of his powers rather than by conformity. . . ." ⁴²

IX. DOES FROMM TAKE FREEDOM SERIOUSLY?

As we look back, we cannot but be impressed by Fromm's passion for living from within—and by so doing linking ourselves to the total growth of others. The search for freedom is man. He must reach for no power beyond himself, be it God, parents, society, or state, to give him security; but by living from within, he must creatively build his own individuality through responsible self-acceptance. "No power transcending man can make a moral claim upon him."⁴³ We have already hinted that in considering conscience "man's recall to himself,"⁴⁴ Fromm is merely assuming that man has an enduring, inescapable "intuition" or awareness that he ought to be the most complete kind of being *he* can be. And Fromm's whole normative humanism is based on his psychological analysis of orientations that keep man from becoming "truly human." Yet what the "real" self is in a positive sense—as we saw in the case of Horney—is very difficult to gather, even when all is said and done. There is always difficulty in knowing what the real self is when by definition

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *The Sane Society*, p. 362.

⁴³ *Man for Himself*, p. 170

⁴⁴ See *ibid.*, pp. 141 ff.

it is the fulfillment of potential that is not defined positively. Despite all that is said about love and productivity and happiness, we are clearer about what they are not than what they are. In order to be illuminating, "making man more human" must be guided, we suggest, by a more articulate theory of what constitutes man, and his values.

But here we would focus on another problem that is especially important for Fromm, though it pervades all the psychologists whom we are considering. It is the nature of freedom. And we must begin by discriminating two types, which should not be confused. There is the freedom that comes from fulfillment, and this we shall call *ethical freedom*. Thus, in Fromm's terms, the productive personality is free because it has superseded the obstacles to living and is realizing its potential. Anyone is free, then, to the extent that he is what he can be.

But presumably, in order to achieve such *ethical freedom*, the individual who is uncertain about the future will be confronted by alternatives, decide to think or not to think about them, and, in any case, make *some choice*, say *yes* or *no*. This is *moral freedom*, and its exercise may or may not lead to ethical freedom.

One would suppose that Fromm, in view of his insistence that man accept the responsibility for productivity and refuse a short-sighted security for a larger creativity, would give theoretical emphasis to moral freedom. But in fact, he denies it. Here the scientific fear of the unpredictable blends with what he believes are the discoveries of psychoanalysis. We are deluded if we take our feeling of free will seriously. "We are prone to believe that we act freely because, as Spinoza has already suggested, we are aware of our wishes but unaware of our motivation."⁴⁵ But in fact our motives are the result of our character orientation. "The will is not an abstract power of man which he possesses apart from his character,"⁴⁶ and if we knew enough about a man's character we could predict his decision. For "the will is nothing but the expression of his character."⁴⁷

To be concrete, on Fromm's view, the person who is *ethically free*, "the productive person who trusts his reason and who is capable of loving others and himself *has the will to act virtuously*."⁴⁸ Here, clearly, freedom of choice, *moral freedom* is denied, but ethical free-

⁴⁵ *Man for Himself*, p. 232.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* (italics added).



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dom asserted. "Will" and "lack of will" do not refer to any human basic capacity, because a person with will is a certain kind of person (productive), and one who lacks will is unproductive.

We might ask Fromm, then, whether the fact that one "escapes from freedom" is anything he can do anything about through the act of choice. Is his character *his* in the sense that *he* is responsible at any point, in any degree, for the choice he has made? Is it not contradictory to say that our reason and our conscience are "our most precious capacities which it is our task to develop and to use,"⁴⁹ if we go on to say that they are "forces within the structure of our total personality . . . determined by the structure as a whole?"⁵⁰ In what sense can we use our reason and develop our conscience if at every point in our lives our decisions are the product of our character orientation up to that time? Our purpose here is simply to call attention to a very knotty problem, to which we shall return. But we may ask whether reason is not itself a false guide if a person cannot choose to think twice and thus to govern himself in thinking at least by evidence and not by personality structure.

X. REFLECTIVE SUMMARY

In Erich Fromm several lines of thought become explicit and emphatic. Man is not a spark of the Divine, but the high point in natural evolution. Man can look for no special awareness (moral consciousness, for example) of moral commands or values in some Source beyond himself. Indeed, all appeals, rational or religious, for direction from sources outside man are outworn props no longer needed by men who will ground their conclusions about man and his values in observation of human experience.

In fact, Fromm vacillates between a scientific posture (in, for example, his refusal to hold, as scientific psychologists do, that human motivation is basically physiological and biological) and a scientific posture (in rejecting unique moral and religious intuitions as relevant sources of evidence about human values). But in his own ultimate appeal to "the voice of the true self," in his insistence that man is not a commodity, to what kind of evidence is he referring?

Fromm is anxious to reject backward-looking explanations of per-

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

sonality or any view that smacks of impositionism. His central theme is that such views discourage man from accepting the responsibility for freedom, wherein his true happiness lies. For human self-development is fraught with uncertainty. In emerging from his oneness with Nature, man gives up once and for all a primordial security, a union with Nature that not even harmony with fellowmen can replace. Nevertheless his task is to be all that he can be as a separate individual, to replace his primary ties by a productive freedom that binds him responsibly to the harmonious growth of others.

The inner anxiety man feels as a result of this tension between individuation and union makes it easy for him to seek safety through social conformity and other ways of avoiding punishment and rejection. Yet, insists Fromm, there is no happiness for man unless he learns to tolerate insecurity and develops from within himself a personality responsive to change and sharing the universal need to love as well as to be loved.

Although we shall make use of many of Fromm's insights, there are some difficulties and ambiguities in his basic concepts. Thus, the freedom that Fromm is talking about is an unwilling freedom that expresses the total development of the unique individual in harmony with others. Yet while it is clear that such freedom-in-fulfillment must be different from mere plasticity, it is far from clear that it is rooted in any capacity to will freely between alternatives. Must "escape from freedom" mean refusal to become one's "real self"? On Fromm's view, we wonder whether one is *morally* free to accept or not to accept responsibility for Fromm's *kind* of freedom, namely, the freedom that comes through self-fulfillment. In the last analysis, it seems to us, Fromm denies moral freedom, despite the fact that his whole discussion presupposes that man can choose, to some extent at any rate, his orientation toward his fulfillment.

Finally, Fromm seems to presuppose, rather than give careful reason for, a view of man's "real nature" that in fact guides his analysis of what man ought to become. The assumption seems to be that man ought to be productively free simply because he cannot be what he "truly is" unless he does become free. But is this much more than reading the desired good back into the nature of man? Why say that what a man is to become or ought to become is what he really is?