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Summary and Evaluation of Erich Fromm's Humanistic Psychoanalysis

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Summary of Erich Fromm's Humanistic Psychoanalysis

He has "no more pressing need than the one to find somebody to whom he can surrender, as quickly as possible, that gift of freedom which he, the unfortunate creature, was born with." This quote, from The Brothers Karamazov, by Dostoyevsky, could just as easily be attributed to Erich Fromm. Submission, to a person, an institution, a group, or to God, is one of the three ways in which man satisfies what Fromm calls his most basic need - the need to find a solution to the peculiarity of human existence.

The major theme running through Fromm's writings is that man, because he is cognizant of his death, is aware that he is born and will die against his will, and is aware of his helplessness before the forces of nature and society, is therefore driven to find a way to escape from the freedom inherent in his situation as an individual. In fact, Fromm defines man as "life being aware of itself."¹

This awareness leads to man's realization that he is alone, separated from nature and even his fellow men. Man has the freedom to mold his own life and despite the vitally important influence of both physiological and cultural factors, man must make his choice between regression to a more secure existence or progression to a less secure, but more human existence. The regression involves security without freedom while the progression involves freedom at the price of the possible loss of security. Fromm believes that, aside from the physiologically nourished cravings of hunger, thirst, and sex, "all essential human cravings are nourished by this polarity."²

Man, as a race and individually, at birth, is "torn away from



his primary union with nature." ³ This creates the need to unite with other human beings. As noted earlier, man can deal with this basic problem through submission to a person, a group, an institution or to God. In this way, he transcends his separateness by becoming part of something bigger than himself. He feels secure in this regression - decisions are made for him by this higher authority, structure is provided, and in fact, he draws his personal identity from the power to which he has submitted.

Another way for man to transcend his aloneness is to become the power to which others submit. This domination, although diametrically opposed to the submission described above, is the same type of regression. The authoritarian has not chosen the path to a more human existence and to freedom but is instead locked into drawing his identity and security from those over who he dominates. The recent tragedy in Guyana involving the Reverend Jim Jones and his followers is a frighteningly illustrative example of the submission and domination methods of man's attempt to escape his aloneness.

Fromm believes that the answer to the problem of human existence lies in the third method of transcending separateness. This is through the achievement of interpersonal fusion with another person, through love. The problems in operationally defining the concept of love are obviously immense, nevertheless, Fromm is aware of the necessity to attempt this. He defines love as "union with somebody or something, outside oneself, under the condition of retaining the separateness and integrity of one's own self." ⁴ He further elaborates this concept by calling love "an active power



in which the paradox occurs that two beings become one and yet remain two." ⁵ This mature love, which Fromm contrasts with symbiotic union, is not exclusively a relationship to a specific person, but rather an attitude which determines how a person relates to the entire world. Mature love is built of four components - motherly, fatherly, brotherly, and self love.

Love is the expression of the emotional aspect of what Fromm calls the productive orientation to life. He defines the productive orientation as "the active and creative relatedness of man to his fellow man, to himself and to nature." ⁶ Fromm also deals with the issues of cognition and action in the productive orientation. The former is expressed through the "proper grasp of the world by reason" ⁷ and the latter is expressed in productive work where man takes pride in his sense of mastery of certain skills.

In opposition to the healthy orientation to the problem of existence described above, Fromm has postulated four nonproductive types of orientation. These are the receptive, exploitative, hoarding and marketing methods of relatedness. Although Fromm does not specifically tie these together, it seems fairly evident that the submission and domination discussed earlier would be, respectively, the affective aspects of the receptive and exploitative orientations.

Fromm makes a distinction between organic drives (instincts) - those whose function it is to guarantee the survival of the individual and the species and nonorganic drives, also called character-rooted passions. The nonorganic drives include the desire for love and freedom, destructiveness, and the wish for power. He feels there is frequently confusion between the two types of drives and says



that man often deceives himself into subjectively experiencing a need as organic when it is actually nonorganic. An example of this is compulsive overeating. An individual may subjectively feel that he is satisfying the physiological drive of hunger when the actual motivation driving him is a character rooted passion - a "psychic hunger", engendered by the feeling of being depressed or anxious." ⁸

Fromm defines personality as the "totality of inherited and acquired psychic qualities which are characteristic of one individual and which make him unique." ⁹ The inherited psychic quality of personality is the temperament. Each person has one of the four - choleric, sanguine, melancholic, and phlegmatic - described by Hippocrates. Fromm considers the temperament to be constitution, therefore, unchangeable. On the other hand, character, which is the acquired quality of the personality, is changeable by cognitive insights and new life experiences.

Character is a very important concept in Fromm's theory. He considers the character system to be the human substitute for the instinctive apparatus of the animal. Since man's actions are not determined by innate patterns, the particular character of an individual allows him to react to life problems and situations in a fairly consistent manner and therefore frees him from having to make a conscious decision each time he is faced with a stimulus. The five orientations previously discussed form the core of his character. It should be clarified here that no one individual exhibits a pure orientation - characteristics of each are present in all men despite the fact that one of them generally dominates.

Fromm explains the development of character as follows: "The



character of the child is molded by the character of its parents in response to whom it develops. The parents and their methods of child training in turn are determined by the social structure of their culture." ¹⁰ Physical constitution and temperament also play a role in the development of character, but they play a much less important role than that contributed by the family and society.

The psychoanalytic theory of Freud and the socio-economic theories of Karl Marx form the base from which Fromm has developed his theory of humanistic psychoanalysis. While synthesizing the concepts of these two diverse theories, Fromm deals with the weaknesses by postulating his own concepts. He decries the simplistic straitjacket of Freud's libido and believes that the relationship between the economic base and the ideology of the society was inadequately explained in Marx's theory. ¹¹

The hypothetical constructs of unconscious motivation and the desire to return to the protection of the mother, which were developed by Freud are also used by Fromm. Here, the similarities end. Freud believed that all human passions could be explained as sublimation of or reaction formations against the various manifestations of the sexual instinct, the libido. Fromm exchanges the construct of man's need for relatedness and calls this the basic need underlying all behavior, rather than explaining behavior on the basis of sexual energy.



Evaluation of Erich Fromm's Humanistic Psychoanalysis

Fromm uses a deductive type of thinking but his mode of theory construction must be deemed functional since he does not rely on a formalized set of propositions.

He has no quarrel with the widely accepted view that psychology is the scientific study of behavior. However, he is adamantly opposed to the use of laboratory experimentation as a method for understanding behavior. Calling the laboratory situation artificial, Fromm feels that the alleged accuracy gained through careful control by the experimenter is completely negated by the triviality of the experiment's results. He prefers to use data collected through 1) minute observation of psychoanalytic sessions, 2) dream analysis, 3) detailed history of an individual, including study of diaries and letters and 4) study of natural situations in life. Elaborating on the last of these methods, he says that one should choose "given social situations which are comparable and transform them into the equivalent of experiments by the method of studying them. By keeping some factors constant, others variable, this natural laboratory also permits the testing of various hypotheses. One of the simplest forms of such 'natural experiments' are enquetes (using long and open ended questionnaires and/or personal interviews) with selected representatives from certain groups, such as age or occupational groups, prisoners, hospital inmates, and so forth."

His method is empirical in the sense that he gathers his data through careful observation. However, I do not believe that his data is presented in a manner free from differing interpretations.



Any time that a subject's unconscious impulses are examined in connection with his overt behavior, the interpretations can only be suggested, they can not be proven.

Fromm attempts to organize his observations into a limited number of statements and thereby make sense of them. An example of this formulation is his five orientations discussed in the summary. From this example, I would not classify his theory as systematic because he does not follow through on his organization. He very neatly describes an affective, cognitive, and action aspect of the productive orientation then fails to delineated these aspects of the four other orientations.

He does not use any form of measurement in his method and, in fact, blasts psychologists for imitating the method of the natural sciences and for using mathematical formulations to cover the lack of theoretical significance in their work.

His explanation of the factors underlying man's behavior is most assuredly not parsimonious. Foreseeing this criticism, he counters it and attempts to justify his constellation of physiological, cultural, and economic influences on the individual by arguing that life is complex and that the overly simplified views of behavior do not deal with the basic problem of man's existence while his, admittedly complex, yet comprehensive explanations do attempt an answer to this problem.

Fromm can be praised for his efforts at operational definitions. He carefully distinguishes and defines various aspects of the terms he uses, such as love and aggression. Clarity of thought is worked towards by Fromm and despite the shortcomings that arise, it is clear



that he is attempting operationalism. It is a difficult task, made even more difficult by the differing perceptions we all have of words central to his concepts.

Motivation is the primary psychological construct that Fromm studies although learning, perception, cognition, personality, instinct, and emotion are all discussed at some length in his writings.

As would be the case with any thinker attempting a comprehensive theory, Fromm tends not to take extreme positions on the nine basic issues of psychology, preferring a more or less formulation to an either/or one. However, his exceptions are on the molar/molecular and utility/purity dimensions. He believes that a molar approach to the study of man is an imperative. This ties in with his strictly utilitarian view of psychology. He criticizes other theories, especially behaviorism, for not addressing the question of motivation in terms of the organism's entire reaction to the world and the causes underlying these responses.

Fromm uses both data and concepts from many other sciences, including anthropology, neurophysiology, genetics, biology, paleontology and animal behavior. This is neither a reductionist view, since it does not reduce psychology to a more basic level through the use of another science, nor a nonreductionist view, since it does not claim that psychology can stand on its own independent of other sciences. Instead, Fromm argues that the data from psychology and the other sciences listed above must be combined to form a new science of man, one that will be able to handle the complexities of human nature that can not be dealt with while the scientists, historians, economists, and sociologists all work in different directions.



On a continuum, Fromm's approach is closer to subjectivism and qualification but he acknowledges the importance of objectivism and quantification, with the former carrying slightly more weight in his theory than the latter.

He believes reward is an important factor in both learning and character development but does not give it primary significance.

On the determinism/teleology scale his position can be classified near the middle, leaning slightly more towards a teleological explanation of behavior. The psychoanalytic concepts he uses form the deterministic aspect while the possibilities for changing one's behavior toward a more productive character orientation attest to the teleological aspect.

The case is similar with the empiricism/nativism dimension. Fromm believes that innate characteristics, such as temperament and organic drives combine with the character rooted, learned, passions to result in man's behavior.

Fromm's position is dualistic regarding the mind/body controversy. He believes the mind and body are separate, but interacting although he admits that he can not specify the proportions or mechanisms of their interaction.

Erich Fromm's theory of humanistic psychoanalysis is extremely complex, indeed this is my major criticism of his theory. I believe his holistic premise that we must study the entire man and all influences on him is an important concept but I do not think we have come far enough in our understanding of some of the basic psychological constructs to attempt a major synthesis of data and concepts from so many diverse fields such as Fromm has tried. In



fact, he takes the first technical criteria admonition to cover all available data and integrate it into the theory in such a literal way as to basically invalidate the five remaining criteria. His attempt to bring all available knowledge regarding man together in one theory is the reason his theory is not parsimonious and can not be tested.

There are also several inconsistencies in his theory. One example of this is two different explanations he gives of man's character rooted passions. In one sentence he says, "What I am trying to show is that man's noninstinctual character rooted passions are the outcome of his biological constitution."¹³ Besides the logical contradiction in the sentence itself between character rooted (defined elsewhere as learned) and specifying that these passions are the outcome of man's biological constitution (inherited), he then, two pages later, says that the intensity of man's character rooted passions are due not to specific physiological needs, but to the need of the organism to grow both physically and mentally.

Predictions can not be made from his theory because of the complex social and economic factors involved in character development of the individual and the species. Fromm, in fact, added the marketing orientation approximately 15 years ago after judging the way in which capitalistic society was behaving and influencing people to behave. This shows that predictions can not be made because Fromm states that man's behavior is based on many factors that can not be foreseen but it does show at least that his theory is flexible enough to incorporate new data and concepts.

Despite the lack of consistency, parsimony, testable hypotheses,



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and systemization to Fromm's writings, they are still extremely worthwhile in other ways. His theory construction is poor yet through his synthesis of diverse fields, he has come up with some fascinating comments. They are really more in the realm of philosophy and ethics than the science of psychology but his work has broken important ground and will hopefully lead to further study. As was the case with Structuralism, Fromm's humanistic psychoanalysis could die out sometime in the future but it will certainly inspire others to argue against it and will hopefully spawn new discoveries in the science of psychology.



Endnotes

- 1
Erich Fromm, The Art of Loving (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1956), p. 4.
- 2
Erich Fromm, The Sane Society (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1955), p. 27.
- 3
Fromm, Sane Society, p. 29.
- 4
Fromm, Sane Society, p. 41.
- 5
Fromm, Art of Loving, p. 27.
- 6
Fromm, Sane Society, p. 35.
- 7
Erich Fromm, The Heart of Man (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 8.
- 8
Erich Fromm, The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973), p. 73.
- 9
Erich Fromm, Man for Himself (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1947), p. 50.
- 10
Fromm, Man for Himself, p. 61.
- 11
B. Landis and E.S. Tauber, Eds., In the Name of Life (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), p. 4.
- 12
Fromm, Anatomy, p. 46.
- 13
Fromm, Anatomy, p. 6.



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