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The Core Theme of Erich Fromm's Writings and Its Implications for Therapy

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All of Fromm's writings are of one piece. He is very clear in phrasing and rephrasing his messages, yet I doubt that his central themes find many understanding ears. We are not open to a language which appeals to fundamental spiritual values in all spheres of life—the sphere of society's political and economic organization, and the sphere of individual values and life philosophy. When, at some point in *The Sane Society*, he states that Western man is dead, I assume that he refers to our having become deaf to basic spiritual considerations. If Fromm's writing is urgent, it is urgent not only because he sees our society and thus Western man in danger, but because he wishes to reach our reduced capacity to hear and understand these basic humanistic spiritual values. Fromm's moralism is not one which says, „You will go to hell if you do not reform,“ but rather, „You have your life in your own hands, and you can make it better or allow it to become worse.“ In that sense he is not a reformer.

I will try to present my understanding of Fromm's central themes and then discuss the relevance of these themes to our psychoanalytic concerns.

Fromm came from sociology to psychoanalysis. Well versed in philosophy, his roots remained in theology. Fromm's themes are biblical; that is, he interprets biblical themes. He uses biblical stories or messages to explain his

basic concepts and writes in the spirit of the prophetic mode. The loss of paradise symbolizes man's birth as man in the evolutionary ladder, emerging at the point of evolution where instinctive determination had reached a minimum and development of the brain a maximum. Man has developed self-awareness, reason, and imagination. His life cannot be lived by repeating the pattern of his species; *he* must live. Man is the only animal for whom existence is a problem he has to solve and from which he cannot escape. His essential nature cannot be defined in terms of specific qualities, such as love, hate, reason, good, or evil, but only in terms of fundamental contradictions which characterize human existence. Man is forced to overcome the horror of separateness, of powerlessness, and of lostness, and to find new forms of relating himself to the world. He still craves unity with nature and struggles with the inevitable task of taking responsibility for his life. Fromm illustrates this conflict by discussing the theme of idolatry in the Bible. He writes (1966, p. 43): „Anyone who reads the Hebrew Bible cannot but be impressed by the fact that while it contains hardly any theology, its central issue is the fight against idolatry... The approach to understanding of what an idol is begins with the understanding of what God is not. God, as the supreme value and goal, is not man, the state, an institution, nature, power, possession, sexual powers, or any arti-



fact made by man. The affirmations 'I love God, I want to become like God' mean first of all 'I do not love, follow, or imitate idols.' It is first of all a negative theology. Fromm continues:

An idol represents the object of man's central passion: the desire to return to the soil-mother, the craving for possession, power, fame, and so forth... May it suffice to say that the history of mankind up to the present is primarily the history of idol worship, from the primitive idols of clay and wood to the modern idols of state, the leader, production and consumption. Man transfers his own passions and qualities to the idol. The more he impoverishes himself, the greater and stronger becomes the idol. The idol is the alienated form of man's experience of himself.

The same idea is expressed in Psalm 115: „They [the idols] have hands but do not feel; feet but do not walk, and they do not make sounds in their throat. Those who make them are like them.“ Idolatry is incompatible with freedom and independence. Freedom and independence bring the challenge or responsibility of becoming fully human. Being fully human means being open to the voice which expresses the demands of life and growth. „Good“ for the humanistic conscience is all that furthers life; „evil“ is all that arrests and strangles it.

It is important to understand the emphasis on a negative theology. Fromm quotes Meister Eckhart to express this spirit (1966, p. 62):

That I am man
I have in common with all men.
That I see and hear
And eat and drink
I share with all animals.
But that I am I is exclusively mine, And belongs to me
And to nobody else,
To no other man
Nor to an angel nor to God,
Except inasmuch as I am one with him.

For Fromm, the idea of one God expresses a new answer for the solution of the dichotomies of human existence; man can find oneness with the world, not by regressing to the prehuman state, but by the full development of his specifically human qualities: love and reason.

Fromm develops his theme of freedom and responsibility in a subchapter of *You Shall Be As Gods* called „Man As the Maker of His History.“ He writes (1966, p. 115): „With the death of Moses the revolution against serfdom and idolatry had failed... Could God not have saved man by changing his heart through an act of grace? This question touches upon the fundamental principle of the biblical and postbiblical concept of history. The principle ... is that man makes his own history ... and God does not change the nature of man, nor his heart. There is only one reason for the account as it stands: that man is free to choose his way and yet must accept the consequences of his choice.“ God, however, is not a passive spectator. He sends his messengers, the prophets. Central to the prophet's message is messianic hope or messianic vision. This messianic vision rests upon the tension between what has existed and what was becoming, was yet to be. This vision, or that which is hoped for, may not be realized in one's lifetime, yet one must expect the messiah every day. Hope is thus paradoxical. It is neither passive waiting, nor is it an unrealistic forcing of circumstances that cannot occur. Fromm uses the metaphor of the crouched tiger, which will jump only when the moment for jumping has come.

Fromm describes the prophet role. Prophets do not predict the future. They see present reality free from the blindfolds of public opinion and authority. They feel compelled to express the voice of their conscience to say what possibilities they see, to show the alternatives, and to warn the people. It is up to the people to take the warning and change or to remain deaf and blind. Prophetic language is always the language of alternatives, of choice, and of freedom. It is never that of determinism.

Fromm summarizes four functions of the prophets: (1) They announce to man that there is a God, the one who has revealed himself to them, and that man's goal is to become fully human. (2) As mentioned, they show man the alternatives from which he can choose and their consequences. (3) They dissent and protest when man takes the wrong road, but they do not abandon the people. (4) They do not think only in terms of individual salvation, but believe that individual salvation is bound up with the



salvation of society. Their concern is the establishment of a society governed by love, justice, and truth; they insist that politics must be judged by moral values, and that the function of political life is the realization of those values. Fromm presented his ideas with the urgency of his belief, but he did not aim to have converts. To „have“ is the idea of having an idol—fame or possessions. His ideas were there to be heard if anyone cared to hear. Fromm did not form a school of thought: he did not want disciples. He wanted men to be creative and productive and struggle in their own way for the qualities in themselves and their lives which furthered life rather than being destructive of it.

The crucial issue between the need for idols or the acceptance of a negative theology is discussed by Fromm in many different forms. He elaborates on it (1976, p. 15) when describing the having or the being modes of life, a theme which, as he points out, the great Masters of Living have made the central issue. of their respective systems. The Buddha teaches that in order to arrive at the highest stage of human development, we must not crave possessions. Jesus teaches that „For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it.“ Meister Eckhart taught that to have nothing and make oneself open and „empty,“ not to let one’s ego stand in one’s way, is the condition for achieving spiritual wealth and strength. Marx taught that luxury is as much a vice as poverty and that our goal should be to be much, not to have much. Fromm contrasts two poems, one by Tennyson and one by Goethe. Tennyson’s verse is as follows:

Flower in the crannied wall,
I pluck you out of the crannies,
I hold you here, root and all, in my hand,
Little flower—but *if I* could understand
What you are, root and all, and all in all,
I should know what God and man is.

Tennyson, Fromm comments, reacts to the flower by wanting to have it. While he speculates about the flower’s possible secret knowledge for man and God, he kills the flower in his contemplation. Fromm compares this form of investigation to that of the Western scientist

who seeks the truth by dismembering life. Goethe’s poem is that of an encounter with a flower which he lovingly transplants to his garden. The last verse says:

And planted it again
In a quiet place.
Now it ever spreads
And blossoms forth.

For Goethe the force of life is greater than the force of intellectual curiosity. Fromm beautifully describes the contrast between the having and being modes in our daily experience by discussing activities such as learning, remembering, conversing, reading, exercising authority, having knowledge and knowing, faith, and loving. In the being mode, the accent is on an inner activity, a connectedness that involves interest, meaning, respect, and caring. It is not a matter of having knowledge but of the activity of knowing or wishing to know. In loving, one never has the other; all one’s activity is directed to being, that is, to giving to and stimulating the other. The state of being is an aliveness which creates joy, love, compassion, sadness, and also despair. This aliveness is always creative, as there is hope and faith but never any certainty.

Essential to Fromm’s faith in the existence of a basic urge in man to develop his full humanness is an understanding of Fromm’s theme of hope. Hope is ever-important. It is an intrinsic element of the structure of life, of the dynamics of man’s spirit. Hope is a psychic concomitant to life and growth. It is ever implied by the nature of life. Fromm writes (1968, p. 13), „If a tree which does not get sun bends its trunk to where the sun comes from, we cannot say that the tree ‘hopes’ in the same way in which a man hopes, since hope in man is connected with feelings and awareness that the tree may not have. And yet it would not be wrong to say that the tree hopes for the sunlight and expresses this hope by twisting its trunk toward the sun. Does the suckling not hope for his mother’s breast? Does the infant not hope to stand erect and to walk? Does the sick man not hope to be well, the prisoner to be free, the hungry to eat? Does love making not imply a man’s hope in his potency, in his capacity to arouse his partner, and the woman’s hope to



arouse him?“

Fromm's emphasis on the intrinsic nature of hope in the structure of life is of fundamental importance. The hope for hope resides in this belief—it is not necessarily explicit. Only eyes which look may see it. Only ears which are attuned will hear it. It often expresses itself by indirection. Fromm, in speaking of hearing the voice of our conscience, describes the difficulties of listening to ourselves. „We listen,“ he writes, „to every voice and to everybody but not ourselves. We are constantly exposed to the noise of opinions and ideas hammering at us from everywhere... Listening to ourselves is so difficult because this art requires another ability, rare in modern man, that of being alone with oneself... Listening to the feeble and indistinct voices of our conscience is difficult also because it does not speak to us directly but indirectly and because we are often not aware that it is our conscience that disturbs us. We may feel anxious, out of sorts, perturbed, irritated, and yet not know what is causing this oppression.“

There is no way of hoping without the experience of disappointed hope, or even shattered hope. „Perhaps this is good,“ Fromm writes. „If man did not experience the disappointment of his hope, how could he avoid the danger of being an optimistic dreamer? In fact, disappointed or shattered hope is at the core of man's retreat into a state of half aliveness or of becoming destructive. The end result of shattered hope may be a shallow, non-caring optimism, or a retreat into a resigned state of half aliveness, or a pursuit of destructiveness which seems like a revenge on life for withholding its bounty. It also takes the form of suffering and despair in many forms. This suffering or despair, while not a guarantee for change, is nevertheless an essential ingredient for change.“ Hope and despair or hope and the poignancy of disappointment are two sides of a coin, like day and night, death and life, and happiness and sorrow.

How is this message and this language, to which we are not accustomed, related to psychotherapy? Fromm was always a therapist, but he did not write about psychotherapeutic technique. I am indebted to Bernard Landis (1981) and Ed Tauber (1959) for their respective articles on Fromm's therapeutic stance. Fromm rarely

referred to neuroses. Once in his book, *To Have or To Be?*, he remarked in parenthesis that the having mode is involved in most neurotic difficulties. His lack of reference is important, as he believed the conflict between the being and the having modes to be universal, and that neurotic difficulties represented only a variation which happened to be seen in the psychiatrist's or the therapist's office. The conflict was thus not one uniquely due to individual adversities of circumstance and development: we all share this existential challenge, though in unique variations. I have often objected to the tendency of some neo-Freudians, Sullivan and Horney in particular, to pathologize normal existence, to have an implied ideal norm. Fromm's ideal norm has a different characteristic. It is not what we should be and are not. It is more a humanistic, messianic vision which introduces the element of hope and value into our striving for human growth.

I will mention several features that characterize Fromm's therapeutic mode: (1) The full intense aliveness of the therapist to his patient; (2) his focus on sensitivity to authenticity; (3) his emphasis on responsibility; and (4) his active promoting of the pro-life resources in the patient, among them his creativity, his capacity for joy, for caring, and for love.

Fromm expects a total, concentrated „thereness“ of the therapist to the patient. He writes (1960): „In this productive relatedness between analyst and patient, in the act of being fully engaged with the patient, in being fully open and responsive to him, in being soaked with him, as it were, in this center-to-center relatedness lies one of the essential conditions for psychoanalytic understanding and cure. The analyst must become the patient, yet he must be himself; he must forget that he is the doctor, yet he must remain aware of it. Only when he accepts this paradox can he give 'interpretations' which carry authority because they are rooted in his own experience.“

Fromm's ear was attuned to the authentic in the patient and thus able to bypass the obscuring social or intellectual facade. This is what is meant by center-to-center relatedness. The concept of responsibility is hard to describe. It was implicit in Fromm's attitude to the patient.



He had all of Fromm's attention and concern, but it was up to the patient to be active in changing, to grapple and reach out for life. Fromm was not a hand-holder in the process. Still, he felt that the aliveness of the therapist would spark the aliveness of the patient.

Fromm (1976, p. 34) describes the conversing mode of „being“ persons: „They come fully alive in the conversation, because they do not stifle themselves by anxious concern with what they have. Their own aliveness is infectious and often helps the other person to transcend his or her egocentricity. Thus the exchange becomes a dialogue in which it does not matter anymore who is right. The duelists begin to dance together, and they part not with triumph or sorrow—which are equally sterile—but with joy. (The essential actor in psychoanalytic therapy is this enlivening quality of the therapist. No amount of psychoanalytic interpretation will have an effect if the therapeutic atmosphere is heavy, unalive, and boring.)“

Also difficult, though ever essential, is the impact of Fromm's life philosophy on the therapeutic interchange. It was ever-present in his own person. As a therapist, though sensitive, he would not stay on the side of caution but would reach out to mobilize constructive forces in a kind of no-nonsense fashion. Tauber (1959) describes this aspect: „The analyst is not waiting, figuring things out, cautiously weighing what the patient can tolerate because, Fromm regretfully asserts, most delays are in the service of the therapist's anxiety anyway. The therapist should reveal by his own genuine interest, dedication, openness, and true participation that there is an urgency to grasp life, to search, and to dare uncertainty.“

I would like to end by describing Fromm's total respect for the uniqueness of human nature, which is in contrast to our sometimes arro-

gant tendency to describe the dynamics or the nature of a patient as if we knew it. „Being,“ Fromm writes (1976, p. 87) „refers to experience, and human experience is in principle not describable. What is fully describable is our persona—the mask we wear, the ego we present—for this persona is in itself a thing. In contrast, the living human being is not a dead image and cannot be described at all. Indeed, much can be said about me, about my character, about my total orientation to life. This insightful knowledge can go very far in understanding and describing my own or another's psychical structure. But the total me, my whole individuality, my suchness that is as unique as my fingerprints are, can never be fully understood, not even by empathy, for no two human beings are entirely alike. Only in the process of mutual alive relatedness can the other and I overcome the barrier of separateness, inasmuch as we both participate in the dance of life. Yet our full identification of each other can never be achieved.“

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