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Fromm's Humanistic Ethics and the Role of the Prophet

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Fromm rarely wrote in the conventional style of psychoanalysis, and he seldom spelled out the relevance of his writing to psychoanalysts. But as I will show, relevance is everywhere. It is important to appreciate the explicitness of Fromm's style. It is as explicit as that of Picasso or any painter of recent deconstructionism. He paints in stark black and white; there are no grays. He paints a message. The message is to stir people out of any illusion that life can be lived well with any degree of passive submission; rather, it has to be lived actively with the knowledge that life constantly offers alternatives and that choice is important.

Fromm (1962) believed that no one can save a fellow being by making a choice for him or her. „All that one man can do,“ he writes, „is to show him the alternatives truthfully and lovingly, yet without any sentimentality or illusion. Confrontation with the true alternatives may awaken all the hidden energies in a person, and enable him to choose life, no one else can breathe life into him“ (p. 176).

The phrase „all that one man can do“ is deceptively simple, but it is full of significance. It points to Fromm's chosen style. This style, like so much of his basic belief, has roots in rabbinical traditions, in biblical themes reinterpreted by him. The style is that of the prophets. Fromm describes the prophet's role. Prophets do not predict the future. They 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. The prophets dissent and protest when man takes the wrong road, but they do not abandon the people. They do not think in terms of individual salvation, but believe that individual salvation is bound up with the salvation of society.

Fromm's foremost reaffirmation is the biblical fight against idolatry. We cannot understand God; we can try to understand what God is not. It is a negative theology. The same is true of our understanding of human beings. We can describe their personae, the masks they wear, their egos, but living human beings cannot be described like things. They cannot be described at all. One's total individuality, one's suchness, which is unique, can never be fully understood not even by empathy, for no two human beings are entirely alike.¹ That is the fundamental message. Separate from it, although not less important, are the specific messages of the wrong and right roads as Fromm sees them, based on his humanitarian ethics.

Toward a Humanitarian Ethics

I will place Fromm's concerns with humanitarian

¹ Fromm's major work on aggression (1973), malignant aggression in particular, which he calls necrophilia, is written in part to tell us what is not biophilic.



ethics in the context of the history of psychoanalytic interest in moral values in order to highlight his beliefs. The relationship of moral values and neuroses has been an uncomfortable issue in the history of psychoanalysis. Freud's superego is related to the biological force of the id and specifies taboos on murder and incest, but there is little else that one can construe as a broader ethic.

Heinz Hartmann (1960) first confronted the issues in *Psychoanalysis and Moral Values*, a thoughtful book in which he affirms the separate realms of psychoanalysis and moral issues, and writes that neurosis is not a „moral problem.“ He writes:

„You know how carefully we avoid, in analysis, imposing ethical demands on our patients. [p. 92] ... Analysis is as little a never-failing key to morality as it is, as Freud was the first to remind us, a reliable key to happiness. [p. 87] ... The recognition of one's authentic values and their distinction from those which are not authentic, is not infrequently sharpened in the course of analysis. This will not change a 'bad' person into a 'good' person, or only rarely. What it means is that the codes can become less distorted, often less one-sided expressions of the moral aspects of the personality.“ [p. 92]

The neo-Freudians took this problem much more seriously. For them neurosis was indeed a moral problem. This was a radical shift—a shift as important as their abandonment of the libido theory. Neurotic forces cause self-alienation and thus interfere with productivity, creativity, and relationships to others. Karen Horney's first chapter in her last book, *Neurosis and Human Growth* (1950) is called, „A Morality of Evolution.“ Neurotic forces, according to her, interfere with man's nature-given strivings for self-realization:

„You need not, and in fact cannot, teach an acorn to grow into an oak tree, but when given a chance, its intrinsic potentialities will develop. Similarly, the human individual, given a chance, tends to develop his particular human potentialities. He will develop then the unique alive forces of his real self: the darity and depth of his own

feelings, thoughts, wishes, and interests; the ability to tap his own resources, the strength of his will power; the special capacities or gifts he may have; the faculty to express himself and to relate himself to others with his spontaneous feelings.“ [p. 17]

Horney, with her usual clarity, here describes the mental health norm that became widely accepted—a norm that not only measured what could be, but also what „was not given a chance,“ meaning the interplay between environment, anxiety, and neurotic defensive strategies that interfere with natural growth. These ideal norms helped to create the widely accepted notion that being neurotic was being bad or less of a human being, and not being neurotic was equated with health and human integrity. The 1940s and 1950s were the years of the greatest idealism about the role of psychoanalysis as the savior of mankind. Money-Kyrle (1961), an associate of Melanie Klein, in his book *Man's Picture of His World* speaks of the hope that, if carried out on a scale wide and deep enough, psychoanalysis could affect the world as a whole and point toward a happier future for mankind.

In spite of differences, Freudians and neo-Freudians share the idea that moral issues are not directly their concern or responsibility. Freudians feel their therapeutic realm is distinct from such issues; neo-Freudians rely on nature's inherent positive forces. Fromm, although a co-builder of the neo-Freudian position, arrived at a different philosophy. Man has the potentiality for good and evil. Evil is not just a by-product of psychopathology. Our notions of mental health are not just a measure of disease, but a mixture of neurotic psychopathology and beliefs in our Western ethics. Fromm accepted the challenge, which is most succinctly expressed by Stephen Jay Gould (1987) when he writes of our biased view of evolution as inherently progressive; that is, to believe that good design or harmony of the system is entailed in the laws of nature. Gould writes:

„We are left with two choices in reinterpreting our oldest hope that moral messages might be extracted from nature: either the messages are there and they are terrible



... or moral messages cannot be derived from nature's facts. The ethical standards of human life are not written upon the heavens or etched into a blade of grass. These are human concepts, fit only for human definitions and human struggles. Thus we need humanists of all stripes, for science does not touch these deepest questions." [p. 146]

Fromm is such a humanist. He called his philosophy radical humanism, its character dialectic, its spirit critical and challenging. The word *radical* is used in the sense of going to the roots of a matter. The words *critical* and *challenging* are important to indicate that „being“ is an ever-changing activity with no final answers. *Dialectic* connotes a similar emphasis on processes involving tension, challenge, and attempts at solutions. Tension is inherent in the essence of man, as Fromm sees it. This essence of man evolves out of a dichotomy in his biological nature—“being in nature“ and thus subject to its laws, and yet simultaneously transcending nature, being aware of himself and his existence, an awareness that demands solutions. „The energies of man,“ Fromm (1992) writes, „have as their aim the transformation of the unbearable dichotomy into a bearable one and the creation of ever new and, as far as it is possible, better solutions of this opposition“ (p. 25). We are forced to react as long as we live, seeking relief from this unbearable tension, which is experienced as helplessness.

No absolute answers exist. Human beings find many ways, of course, of meeting this existential dilemma. Fromm points to regressive and progressive solutions, to wrong and right turns at the fork of the road. The sense of helplessness causes the average person to look for all-wise, powerful, all-caring figures. Strong affective bonds develop to such magic helpers, be they religious forces, people, or institutions. Fromm refers to these figures as idols. It is this yearning for and relying upon idols that leads to regressive solutions, rather than to constructive solutions that aim at man's unfolding of his own resources. Fromm's books were written with the hope of making people aware of existing alternatives and their consequences.

Fromm's Revision of Psychoanalysis

Fromm's main body of writings, as mentioned, is not about psychoanalysis. However, in 1992 his *The Revision of Psychoanalysis*—written as part of a larger project, never completed, on a systematic work on humanistic psychoanalysis—was published by Dr. Rainer Funk, the editor of Fromm's literary estate. This little book illustrates Fromm's philosophy of radical humanism as applied to the particulars of psychoanalysis. He challenges psychoanalysis to make efforts toward a creative revision if it intends to live up to its promises of helping people develop greater authenticity and find their right way of being. Fromm writes:

„A creative renewal of psychoanalysis is possible only if it overcomes its positivistic conformism and becomes again a critical and challenging theory in the spirit of radical humanism. This revised psychoanalysis will be critical of all social arrangements that warp and deform men; and it will be concerned with the process that could lead to the adaptation of society to the needs of man, rather than with man's adaptation to society.“ [p. 19]

Fromm lists six areas that need revision: the theory of drives, the theory of the unconscious, the theory of society, the theory of sexuality, the theory of the body, and psychoanalytic therapy. The common elements in the philosophy of these revisions are (1) a shift to process thinking away from static concepts, (2) a concept of knowledge that emphasizes experience rather than scientific knowledge, (3) the full realization that man is primarily a social being who functions in the context of his particular environment, (4) a clear humanistic orientation, and (5) the socially critical insight into the ever-present conflicts between the interests of most societies in the continuity of their system and the interests of man in the optimal unfolding of his potentialities. „This insight,“ Fromm writes, „implies refusal to accept ideologies at their face value: rather it urges consideration of the search for the truth as a process of liberating oneself from illusions, false consciousness, and ideologies“ (p. 21). Fromm challenges societies, institutions, and the individual.



Forks in the Road

While Fromm and Horney agree on what a human being could be at best, they differ in that Horney believes in innate forces that strive toward self-realization. Fromm does not believe that people necessarily know their way, even if not diverted by neurotic forces. Most people fail in the art of living, not because they are inherently bad or so without will that they cannot live a better life, but rather because they do not wake up and see when they stand at a fork in the road. They need to be alerted to their fate that they have to struggle to find the directions for living, that they have to work out their lives by active participation.

Gould and Fromm differ only in their hopes. Gould has no illusion that nature provides the answer, while Fromm continued to flirt with nature. In his book, *The Revolution of Hope*, Fromm (1968) asks, almost with nostalgia, whether there is objective evidence at least suggestive that our norms should be guiding principles for all. He falls back on the premise of harmony and the maximum of vitality and well-being, and, given that premise, the biophilic norms would be more conducive to the optimum of growth and well-being.

In spite of Fromm's belief in a negative theology, he describes the art of being alive in many ways. As his notion of a fully alive being is not different from our own implicit or explicit conception, I will give only a few of his descriptions.

„The person who fully loves life is attracted by the process of life and growth in all spheres. He prefers to construct rather than to retain. He is capable of wondering, and prefers to see something new rather than looking for the security of finding confirmation of the old. He loves the adventure of living. He sees the whole rather than the part. He wants to mold by love, reason and persuasion, not by force. He enjoys life rather than just craving excitement.” [1964, p. 45]

„What then is his identity in a human sense? Identity is the experience which permits a

person to say legitimately 'I' as an organizing active center of the structure of all his actual or potential activities. This experience of „I“ exists only in the state of spontaneous activity, but it does not exist in the state of passiveness and half-awakeness, a state in which people are sufficiently awake to go about their business but not awake enough to sense an „I“ as the active center within themselves. This concept of the „I“ is different from the concept of the ego.” [1968, p. 87]

Fromm (1976) describes being in conversation:

„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 egocentricity. ... The conversation becomes a dialogue in which it does not matter any more who is right. The duelists begin to dance together, and they part not with triumph or sorrow—but with joy.” [p. 34]

Fromm here makes his few references to psychoanalytic treatment.

„The essential factor in psychoanalytic therapy,” he writes, „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“ (p. 34).

Even this short description would be incomplete without mentioning the quality of hope. Hope to Fromm is ever important. It is an intrinsic element of the structure of life, of the dynamic of the human spirit. Hope is a psychic concomitant of life and growth. It is ever implied by the nature of life. Hope is looking forward to, is faith, is intention, is active wishing, is the excitement of ideas or of an encounter. Hope is inherent in caring and in any creative endeavor. It is the emotion that energizes our search, our ideas, our activities, and enhances the intensity of meaning. Hope is, however, a constantly endangered phenomenon. Its vulnerability is extreme. Resignation, the no-hope counterpart, is destructive of life by omission.



Fromm aimed at addressing a spiritual dimension in us that potentially can inform our modes and acts of living, no matter what we may be doing. He described an ideal to strive for, even though our complex nature and world continuously demand or lead us into compromises. Fromm did not present prescriptions, just food for thought and consideration. These spiritual values also have relevance, of course, to the art of being a therapist and doing therapy.

Qualities of Being „Fully Alive“

I will group my own considerations of this relevance around the topics of the meaning of „being fully alive,“ „idolatry,“ „dualistic thinking,“ „caring,“ and „hope.“ It is easy to embrace the mentioned values. I will point to some of the inevitable conflicting stresses that give an ever-present poignancy to our quest for being what we want to be.

How many of us maintain or even strive after a schedule that is compatible with full aliveness? We overschedule, in a hectic existence we place one foot in front of the other, which permits little thought or contemplation to what may have transpired. How many of us have time for walks we greatly need to feel refreshed and to let our brain do what it does best when least attended to by conscious thought, namely, to arrive at a sense and a perspective of what is going on. I once came across a study that showed that patients who are scheduled during the first part of the day statistically do better than the ones who are attended to in the more fatigue-laden latter part of the day. I was amused, but it could be true.

Idolatry

The admonition against idol worship is never to be forgotten. Our perspective is blurred over and over again by our wish for knowledge to be certain and for an understanding that is right. We can appreciate the quality of our perception and yet be open to other possibilities of meaning. Often one sentence of a patient shifts our understanding of some particular, reminding us that we see what we construct, not necessarily what is there. We need schools of thought

(idols) to learn potential patterns of being and different ways of conceiving them, but then we also need to be able to cut the umbilical cord. Ideologies and umbilical cords are perpetuated by institutions and our involvements with them, but living requires organization. We evolve our preferred manner of approach and procedures. They are essential. But we easily think of these as not just preferred, but as being right—with a banner attached.

Our chosen procedures are starting points and then take on a life of their own and undergo modification in our mutual therapeutic dance. While it is hard to guard against our yearning for certainty, it is equally hard, if not harder, for our patients. They like to see us as bearers of wisdom, not recognizing the wisdom in themselves. One patient's frequent expression, „You are right,“ filled me with discomfort, as I aim at dialogue. Another patient's responses, „While you were talking I thought ...“ or „That may be so, but ...“ filled me with delight. My emphasis here is on paradox and conflict. How can we spread Fromm's knowledge without running the danger of idolizing or ideologizing Fromm and negating his message? It can be done, but it is difficult.

Dualism

Freud was a dualist. I refer to his life and death instincts, the ego and the id, and others. In religion we meet good and evil. In our field, the duality turns around normal versus pathology. Most of our so-called defenses (pathology) are also modes of adaptation or coping with a difficult world. The less we think or speak in terms of pathology, the closer we are to natural human struggles and the spirit of such struggles. Yet our professional training is steeped in the language of dualism and pathology.

Caring

We care about our patients. Yet many aspects of our procedures touch on self-interest and are not necessarily the best for the patient. We aim at the patient's growth. Growth takes place largely outside the therapeutic office. Many patients would do well with occasional breaks from treatment to stretch their own muscles. Yet regularity of attendance is easiest on our sched-



ule and sense of security about not having too many vacancies. The same goes for frequency of sessions a week. Frequent sessions may encourage dependency. Again, I am just emphasizing conflicts, for financial pressures will intrude and sway us. Awareness at least allows us not to rationalize such influence and to encourage consideration of alternatives.

One aspect of caring may be curtailed by time. Patients enjoy our interest and participation in their activities outside the office. We gain much from reading poetry or books that have had special meaning for them. If they are artists or writers, our appreciation of their work shows that we care. But we are often too busy to extend our interest in them beyond the paid-for hour.

Hope

Hope touches on the core of what it means to be alive. Thus an essential aspect of therapy is to actively encourage our patients to attend to planning ahead, planning for joy, for venturing out, for vacations, for what they would like to do. This aspect far too often suffers from neglect as the fascination with the past or even the present takes precedence over possible hopes for the future. Any bubble of past enthusiasm, shrunk by inattention, should be given a chance to reexpand. Disappointed hope leads to resignation. Our capacity for resignation is great; it restricts and locks the doors to new unfolding. Again our desire for regularity of treatment may interfere with our encouraging this more spontaneous venturing of the patient.

Conclusion

I have attempted to portray Fromm's vision of the spirit that would inform true aliveness. It is a vision to guide us in our inevitable human struggles to live a good life. I have also tried to emphasize the challenges. Psychoanalysis evolved in a period of determinism, a determinism that became woven into the fabric of its theory and its therapeutic approaches. As students we learn to

follow blue-prints. But only experience will teach us to use our knowledge, our intuition, and teach us the basic truth that there is no answer written on the blackboard out there on how to conduct life or how to conduct therapy. There is a moral dimension to life, whether it is our own or our patient's life. This moral dimension can be actively nurtured and is not consequent to the absence of pathology. We are children of our Western cultural tradition. Our cultural values as well as our personal values are active ingredients in our way of conducting therapy, in what we respond to with pleasure or with concern. We do want to make our patients into beings who are more capable of loving, of being creative and less destructive. Let us affirm the fact that those are our own precious values that guide our enterprises.

Fromm's vision emphasized finding solutions, wrong and right forks in the road, and an admonition that it is up to us to choose. But he also radiated an embracing vitality, joy, and caring which in turn sparked and still spark our vitality and our courage to embrace life.

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