

# REMARKS ON THE PROBLEM OF FREE ASSOCIATION

ERICH FROMM

[1955]

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## INTRODUCTION

Marianne Horney Eckardt :

Ideally, psychoanalysis is an interdisciplinary science. Many scholars, distinguished by their varied backgrounds, have enriched our field. Outstanding among this company is Erich Fromm, known as a Talmudic scholar, a moral philosopher, a sociologist, a social critic, a writer, and, of course, a psychoanalyst. His contributions uniquely reflect the scholarly roads he traveled. But foremost we think of him as a humanist. He himself referred to his pursuits as developing a humanistic science of man, or a humanistic view of the world, or humanistic ethics. This orientation developed at an early date, as he was born into a family deeply rooted in rabbinical tradition. Fromm became, as mentioned, a Talmudic scholar, and all his life was fascinated by the teachings of the prophets. One of my favorite books by Fromm (1966) is *You Shall Be As Gods*, in which he presents his humanistic beliefs as evolved in the Bible and by the prophets. His interest in man led him to the study of sociology and philosophy. The writings of Aristotle, Spinoza, and the young Karl Marx proved to be particularly meaningful. Psychoanalysis fascinated him by the deepened insight into human activity and motivation it offered, and by its discovery of the dynamic unconscious and personality formation.

Fromm was born in 1900 in Frankfurt, Germany. He received his psychoanalytic training in Berlin. He worked with, and was briefly married to, Frieda Fromm-Reichman. His associates then and later were creative,

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Marianne Horney Eckardt, M.D. is a member of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis.

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independent thinkers who forged their own paths. His friends Georg Groddek and Wilhelm Reich opened up new debates. Later, after arriving in the United States, Fromm, Harry Stack Sullivan, Karen Horney, Clara Thompson, and Abraham Kardiner met regularly to challenge, debate, and clarify the mysteries of psychoanalysis and contributed immeasurably to each other's creative productiveness. This group became known as the neo-Freudians, as they began to question the libidinal roots of all neurotic pathology and in many different ways emphasized the impact of culture, family, early environment, and society on normal and neurotic personality development. Fromm (1941) was then at work on his first book, *Escape from Freedom*. He was ever aware of the fact that man is a social animal, that society has formative influences on him, and that he in turn shapes society.

Fromm's activities were rarely limited solely to the practice of psychoanalysis. He participated in a sociopolitical research study on the authoritarian character of workers in Germany. He taught at the New School for Social Research, at Yale, and at Bennington. He lectured all over the world. Above all, he authored more than 25 books and numerous essays and papers. He wrote about the theory of psychoanalysis, though never about individual case histories. He wrote as a social psychologist, as a moral philosopher, and as a social critic. He wrote for a worldwide public and with a mission.

A few more facts about his life should be mentioned before some of his contributions are described. He participated in the founding of the William Alanson White Psychoanalytic Society and Institute in 1944. He met and married Henny Gurland, a photographer. Her illness caused them to move to Mexico City in 1949, and here Fromm established a psychoanalytic institute at the University of Mexico City. Henny died in 1952. The following year Fromm married Annis Freeman. A wonderful companionship enriched their life together. They moved to Cuernavaca and later, because his health demanded it, to Locarno, Switzerland. While Fromm helped found societies and institutes, he did not wish to be a leader nor to have followers. He was, however, a teacher with a vision and a mission.

I will select and emphasize just some of Fromm's contributions and concepts. Fromm believed in evolution. Man has the potential for good or evil. Fromm's (1941) vision pertains to man's humanistic potential as expressed in these lines by Pico della Mirandola, with which Fromm begins his *Escape from Freedom*:

Neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal have we created thee, so that thou mightest be free according to thy own will and honor, to be thy own creator and builder. To thee alone we gave growth and development depending on thy own free will. Thou bearest in thee the germs of a universal life.

We also encounter this vision in Fromm's notions of the biophilic person who loves life, is productive, and relates caringly to his fellow man. We can understand his mission only if we grasp his concept of the essence of man. Man evolved out of animal existence. Our essence consists in the contradiction of being part of nature yet transcending it, as we are endowed with reason and self-awareness. Man has to act to find solutions. No absolute answers exist. Human beings, of course, find a myriad of solutions of many



different qualities. Fromm pointed to regressive and progressive solutions. His life long mission aimed at making people aware of bad solutions, those that do not serve the welfare and growth of man, and pointing to existing alternatives and their consequences. Fromm (1962) wrote, "Confrontation with 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. 146).

Man is a social animal. He has to live in groups and cooperate with others. He must have a frame of orientation that permits him to grasp reality and to communicate with others. This frame of orientation is acquired by learning, but to a large extent it comes about by way of social character formation. Fromm is not referring here to individual character but to social character, that is, to predominant traits that are common to a group. The concept of social character is to Fromm a key concept for the understanding of the social process. "Character," writes Fromm (1992), "is the form in which human energy is channeled during the process of 'socialization' and 'assimilation.' Character is, in fact, a substitute for instincts" (p. 7). In *Escape from Freedom* Fromm (1941) describes the influence of the modern industrialized state on character development. Old family and social bonds are weakened. People feel increasingly powerless and insignificant, and crave an authority that will promise salvation or security. Thus they can become victims of dictatorships.

Fromm's (1947) book, *Man for Himself*, depicts various character orientations and their consequences. These character orientations have definite ethical implications. Fromm is emphatic in his belief that psychology cannot be divorced from ethics. He writes:

My experience as a practicing psychoanalyst has confirmed my conviction that problems of ethics cannot be omitted from the study of personality, either theoretically or therapeutically. The value judgment we make determines our actions, and upon their validity rests our mental health and happiness. . . . Neurosis itself is, in the last analysis, a symptom of moral failure [p. v].

In contrast to Freud, Fromm sees character not as an outgrowth of various types of libido organizations, but as specific kinds of relatedness to the world. He describes the following nonproductive character orientations: (a) The receptive orientation is at its core organized around the idea of being given love, nourishment, security. Persons seem amiable but become anxious when their "source of supply" is threatened. (b) The exploitative orientation is centered around the necessity of taking what one needs as it will not be given voluntarily. (c) The hoarding orientation relies on safety by saving and hoarding. (d) The marketing orientation revolves around experiencing oneself as a commodity, the value of which depends solely on the forces of the market. There exists no solid sense of self, no integrity, as behavior is designed to go with the prevailing winds. In contrast to these orientations, Fromm projects the productive orientation arising out of a capacity of relatedness in all realms of human experiences. Productiveness is man's ability to use his powers for love, caring, and creativity, and to realize the potentialities inherent in him. Every human being is capable of developing this attitude, unless he is mentally and emotionally crippled. Fromm believed



in the existence of an inherent striving for health and happiness. His books *The Sane Society* (1955), *The Art of Loving* (1956), and *You Shall Be As Gods* (1966) give us a sense of what we and society could be, a goal to strive for.

The Fromm article on free association that is presented here is remarkable and unique. It could serve as a classic model for how technical issues in psychoanalysis ought to be discussed, though rarely are. What makes the essay so refreshingly readable is Fromm's language. All concepts are immediately translated into everyday experience and everyday language. He demystifies all jargon. His style may give the impression of addressing an audience unfamiliar with psychoanalysis, but this would fail to recognize Fromm's goal of conveying his thoughts in as clear a manner as possible and not hiding behind abstractions.

Fromm places his comments on free association into the context of the great discoveries of Freud: the unconscious, the mechanism of repression, and how to make this unconscious accessible. Freud taught his patients to bypass their rational conventional mode of thought and to allow thoughts or feelings to arise from somewhere inside them, maybe the belly or the heart. Memories or thoughts were thus revealed which proved amazingly relevant. But methods can deteriorate. They have to retain their meaning and vitality to be effective and this is where Fromm points to the problem. Obedience to the technical rituals of psychoanalysis can take the heart out of the methods and thus rob them of effectiveness. This is particularly true of free associations, which were heralded as the royal road to the unconscious.

To fully appreciate Fromm's criticisms, it is important to understand some core themes of his writings. Most important is his reaffirmation of the old biblical injunction against idolatry. Even in the Bible, the emphasis was not on the worship of one God versus the worship of many gods, but on the worship of one unknowable God in contrast to the worship of images or objects that could be seen, touched, and possessed. Fromm's concern is not with God, but with idols, that is, with what should not be worshiped. Fromm finds that the source of our pervasive human inclination to look for a powerful omniscient person to guide us and promise protection is in our evolutionary emergence from the animal kingdom into human beings with self-awareness. Our instincts alone did not guide us any more; we had to make decisions. We were aware of our vulnerability and helplessness. Thus religions and institutions were born to respond to a deep-seated longing in us to believe in an all-powerful, omniscient, all-caring person or social body, a longing that is ever ready to form an intense affective bond with this magic helper. It resembles the attachment of the child to mother and father in being essentially passive, hoping, and trusting. Fromm calls all these longed-for figures by the generic name of idols. The person transfers his own strength and power to the particular idol, and in so doing curtails his own creativity and individuality. Fromm plays this theme in many different ways. He contrasts two differing approaches to life, the mode of "having," or possessing, and that of "being," which does not rely on what one has, be it power, money, fame, status, or the certainty of knowledge. We find it again in his contrasting the necrophilic person, who wants to possess and takes pleasure in destroying, to the biophilic person who loves life, spontaneity, creativity, affectionate caring, and is open to hope. Hope



replaces certainty. We can hope for and strive for but we do not possess the answers for tomorrow.

Fromm sees the possibility of lessening the tendency to believe in idols. Fromm (1992) writes:

I am led to the conclusion that the sense of powerlessness, and hence the need for idols, becomes less intense the more a person succeeds in attributing his existence to his own active efforts; the more he develops his powers of love and reason; the more he acquires a sense of identity, not mediated by his social role but rooted in the authenticity of his self; the more he can give and is related to others, without losing his freedom and integrity; and the more he is aware of his unconscious, so that nothing human within himself and in others is alien to him [p. 52].

Before elaborating on the relevance of the theme of idol worship to the Fromm article on free association presented here, I want to convey some of Fromm's descriptions of the unconscious. In the article he likens it to our being two people, the rational, conventional person, what C. G. Jung called our persona, and the other, the dissociated person, the child in us, be it of one or three or fourteen years of age. Both these personalities determine our feelings and actions. Unconsciousness is a function, not a place. We can be more or less unconscious. The concept of the "social filter," consisting of the language, logic, and mores of the world around us, appealed to Fromm. We are raised to think, speak, and behave in certain ways, and to adapt to our sociocultural environment. Yet our subjective being coexists, though it may remain private, or secret, or may just appear in our dreams. Fromm equates unconsciousness with the unawareness of truth; becoming aware means discovering the truth. What is not allowed into consciousness is not just what is bad, like hate and feeling murderous; it can be a whole range of perceptions that happen not to blend easily into conventional perceptions. Psychoanalytic therapy is not the only road to truth or to being awakened. New experiences brought about by changes in the environment, be it in the workplace or in new relationships or artistic endeavors, can radically change our perspective and allow a new outlook to emerge.

All of the above does have relevance to the Fromm article you are about to read. The process of deterioration in the manner in which the tool of free association is used is an illustration of how we regard prescribed analytic techniques as sacrosanct, that is, as idols. If you are an obedient, conscientious analyst and routinely tell your patient to obey the rules and say what comes to mind, then all should be well. If all is not well, the assumption arises that the patient's resistance may be causing the trouble. In the article, Fromm restores meaning by offering suggestions as to how to retain pertinence, aliveness, and effectiveness in using this procedure. These are meant only as illustrations. Do not make them into prescriptions to follow! In my own practice, however, I have found very helpful his suggestion to make occasional but deliberately timed intervention by asking for free associations. I want to stress also the importance of Fromm's distinction between requests for information or requests for a rational discussion and requests for free associations. Many analysts do not feel free to ask questions for their own enlightenment because they believe that their patients know their world, take

most of it for granted, and will not mention important details unless they have become emotionally charged. I remember a time when an accidental question of mine revealed that the family never ate together, and in another instance that talk at the dinner table was minimal because the father, or perhaps it was the husband, read the newspaper while eating his meal. Details are important. They enliven the information for us, and thus permit some meaningful empathy. While we listen, our imagination replays the scenarios the patient is presenting to us. We notice gaps and vagueness in our understanding and we inquire. We have to be alert and create an atmosphere of aliveness. Fromm (1976) writes: "The essential factor in psychoanalytic treatment is this aliveness quality in the therapist. No amount of psychoanalytic interpretation will have an effect if the therapeutic atmosphere is heavy, unalive, and boring" (p. 34).

The article is a good example of what Fromm means by aliveness. It speaks to the reader in direct language. Its critical analysis is alert to all nuances of concepts and practicalities. It informs and aims to be helpful by giving perspectives rather than rules. His hope that man has the possibility for a more creative, active, caring existence reaches out to us. Read the article and enjoy it!