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Review E. Fromm: *Sigmund Freud's Mission (1959a)*

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In this book Erich Fromm repeats a number of criticisms of Freud that he has made in the past, as well as adding some new interpretations.

The first six chapters are devoted to an evaluation of Freud's personality and are entitled: Freud's Passion for Truth and His Courage; His Relationship to His Mother; Self-Confidence and Insecurity; Freud's Relationship to Women; Love; His Dependence on Men; His Relationship to his Father; Freud's Authoritarianism. The last four chapters are more general, and explain the title of the book. The chapter headings are: Freud, the World Reformer; The Quasi-Political Character of the Psychoanalytic Movement; Freud's Religious and Political Convictions; Summary and Conclusions.

Freud's mission, according to Fromm, was to bring a new message to mankind, not a happy but a realistic one. To achieve this goal he created the psychoanalytic movement whose "central dogma" (p. 93) is the conquest of passion by reason. Freud's real aim, indeed, was to found a movement for the ethical liberation of man, a new secular and scientific religion for an elite which was to guide mankind. But the new religion has shared the fate of most religious movements; what we are confronted with today is dogma, ritual and idolatry of the leader.

Although the work purports to be a thorough attempt at historical scholarship, its inaccuracy in the use of sources will prevent anyone from taking it too seriously, unless they are merely looking for ammunition with which to condemn Freud.

While references to Ernest Jones' three-volume biography of Freud, Freud's works and other sources are numerous, a careful study of these suggests Fromm's haste and carelessness as a scholar. For the most part the dates of Freud's works from which quotations are taken are not given; for example, although *Civilization and Its Discontents* is referred to on pp. 29, 33, 97, 98 and 99, the date given on page 29 is that of the edition published in 1953, and nowhere is the reader told that the book was written in 1930. Similar treatment is accorded other works of Freud.

Now, since Freud's published writings and references to him cover a period of more than fifty years, in the course of which his ideas underwent extensive change, it is clear that many things can be proved if one chooses to be careless about time and context. To take an outstanding illustration: Fromm says that Freud saw man as basically aggressive and competitive (p. 96) but omits the salient fact that the emphasis on the instinct of aggression represents a change after World War I and that for most of his life he saw sexuality as basic and aggression as secondary. In fact, he explicitly denied what was to become his final view of the aggressive impulse as late



as 1914 (On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement, [1914]. *Collected Papers*, Vol. I, p. 347).

The works of Freud on which Fromm relies most heavily are *The Interpretation of Dreams*, his correspondence with Wilhelm Fliess (*The Origins of Psychoanalysis*) and *Civilization and Its Discontents*. On page 106 there is a footnote in which Fromm says:

I have throughout referred only to what is bulk of Freud's theory, the stage before the discussion of the death instinct.

Since the death instinct was first described in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in 1920, this means that Fromm has deliberately left out the changes of the final period, which set off an entire new chain of thought in the history of psychoanalysis. It cannot be said then that Fromm attempts to present a rounded picture of all of Freud.

The first part of the book is biographical, and Chapters I-V deal with Freud's character structure and his relationships to his parents, to men and women, and to love. Here three incredible omissions are apparent. No mention at all is made of Freud's feelings about his children or about his work, and there is only scant discussion of relationships to men who did not break with him. There is no reference to the published memories of Reik, Binswanger, Martin Freud and many others. In other words, just as most of what Freud wrote is omitted, much of what he lived is simply ignored.

For the most part the biographical material is drawn from Jones. That Freud had neurotic conflicts is scarcely news; Freud said so himself. These are then reinterpreted in the light of Fromm's version of the Oedipus complex. Freud is depicted as an insecure, yet self-confident mama's boy, ambivalent to his father, intolerant of criticism, highly dependent on others for their admiration—a cold, loveless, oral-receptive personality. He had a sense of importance and superiority which might have been constitutional (p. 56). He was a puritanical Victorian who was sexually inhibited and rationalized these inhibitions in his system. He had a secret mission to conquer the world for the sake of the psychoanalytic ideal, a mission of which he was unconscious (p. 92). The goal of Freud's life was the conquest of passion by reason, and this became the goal of psychoanalysis.

Two aspects of this remarkable characterization may be singled out to illustrate the distortions in Fromm's reasoning:

First there is the assertion, repeated again and again, that Freud was a cold, unemotional person who could not love another human being (pp. 5, 23, 28 and other passages). This is “proved” by the following bare assertions: Freud's love for his mother was an infantile attachment. His love for his wife was a desire for conquest. His love for his father was ambivalent. There is no mention whatever of Freud's love for his children. His love for filial figures; even for some who disagreed with him, such as Binswanger (who, incidentally, has published a moving tribute to Freud's love, which Fromm ignores), is either glossed over or interpreted as an unconscious dependency.

For years now Fromm and other culturalists have been lambasting Freud because of his “over-emphasis” of sex. Suddenly we are confronted with the exactly opposite thesis, that Freud was basically anti-sexual:



To him, the aim of life for a civilized person was to suppress his emotional and sexual impulses, and at the expense of this suppression, to lead a civilized life. (p. 33)

Fromm's attempt to justify this about-face is bolstered by a few quotations taken out of context from *Civilization and Its Discontents* (p. 29) and the paper, 'Civilized' Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness (p. 30). The intent of the latter article is misrepresented by leaving out the all-important quotation marks around 'Civilized'.

But the essential incongruity in Fromm's case is that he confuses Freud's account of the plight of modern man with his views on how man might and should live. Freud's observation that "the sexual life of civilized man is seriously disabled" (quoted on p. 29) is a descriptive—not prescriptive—conclusion to which all observers have come (including Kinsey). It should not be confused with how Freud felt the sexual impulse should be handled, ideally. The sense of all of Freud's writings, as well as the paper, 'Civilized' Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness (1908) is a plea for extensive liberalization of the sexual code, (a plea which Fromm now prefers to ignore).

Even the widely cited view that culture involves instinctual renunciation is not an accurate rendition of the whole Freud. Fromm quotes a well-known passage from *Civilization and Its Discontents* as follows (p. 30):

(Freud) went even so far as to think of the possibility that "it is not only the oppression of culture, but something in the nature of (sexual) function itself, that denies us full satisfaction and urges us in other direction.

What Freud actually says in *Civilization and Its Discontents* is (pp. 76-77):

Sometimes one imagines one perceives that it is not only the oppression of culture, but something in the nature of the function itself, that denies us full satisfaction and urges us in other directions. This may be an error; it is hard to decide.

The final sentence, which comes right after the one that Fromm quotes, shows how tentative Freud was about his position, as does the full citation, rather than the abbreviated one that Fromm gives. Freud was not as dogmatic as some would have us believe.

As S. H. Posinsky has shown in a recent article (*Psychoanal. Q.*, Vol. 27, 1958, pp. 1-37), there never was any simple relationship between instinct and culture in Freud's mind and the statements often made to that effect are simply incorrect.

Fromm's last four chapters are concerned primarily with the "quasi-political" character of the psychoanalytic movement, which he blames squarely on Freud.

Fromm's main thesis here will come as a surprise to anyone familiar with the historical events. When Freud discovered that he had all the world as his patient, that he belonged to "those who have disturbed men's sleep" naturally he recognized psychoanalysis as essential for human happiness. In this sense he was a world reformer, since to discover that all men are neurotic implies that they or their children can be made less neurotic. Freud explicitly recognized this fact many times, most clearly perhaps in his book, *The Question of Lay Analysis* (1926) (which Fromm does not quote) and in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. It is odd that relevant passages in the latter book in which Freud spoke of how psychoanalysis could be applied for



human betterment, which Fromm did quote in his *The Sane Society* (pp. 19-20), are not cited in the present book. Now it is necessary to show that Freud was not “aware” of his mission.

The idea that the central goal of psychoanalysis is the subordination of passion to reason will likewise be greeted with astonishment by most practicing analysts. Has the pleasure principle been declared unconstitutional? Is instinctual gratification now totally banned by the statutes of the International? Surely if such a statement, which is so foreign to the entire history and spirit of psychoanalysis, is to be argued seriously by Fromm, he should buttress it with extensive and relevant documentation, not a few scattered phrases taken out of context.

No doubt one of Fromm's motives in writing this book was to fight stultification and ultra-orthodoxy.

The International Psychoanalytical Association has often, by others besides Fromm, been accused of dogmatism, rigidity and blind aversion to new ideas. If Fromm's purpose is to create a freer more democratic environment for the discussion of psychoanalytic ideas this reviewer heartily agrees with him. But why make Freud the culprit? As so often, Fromm quotes only part of a statement, thereby robbing it of its real meaning. In “On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement” (1914), *Collected Papers*, Vol. I, pp. 329-330, Freud wrote:

I considered it necessary to form an official association because I feared the abuses to which psycho-analysis would become subjected as soon as it became popular. There should be some headquarters whose duty it would be to announce: ‘All this nonsense is nothing to do with psychoanalysis; this is not analysis’ [This sentence is the only one Fromm quotes— R.F.] The meetings of the branch societies (which together would form the international association) would provide opportunities for learning and studying psycho-analysis and for the training of medical men, whose work would then have a kind of guarantee upon it. Moreover, it seemed to me desirable, since official science had pronounced its solemn ban upon psycho-analysis and we had declared a boycott against medical men and institutions practising it that the adherents of psycho-analysis should come together for friendly communication with one another and mutual support.

This and nothing else was what I hoped to achieve by founding the International Psycho-Analytical Association. It was probably more than could be attained. Just as my opponents were to discover that it was not possible to stem the tide of the new movement, so I was to find that it would not proceed in the direction I wished to mark out for it.

If the course of the psychoanalytic movement did not proceed in the direction intended for it by Freud in 1914, when there was only a handful of analysts, it assuredly pursued an independent course in the 1920's when he was ill and inactive, and after his death. Again even if Fromm's thesis is correct, it is totally irrelevant in this book.

Furthermore, the situation with regard to the dogmatism of analytic societies is by no means one-sided. In the William Alanson White Institute, where Fromm chaired the faculty for a number of years, any Freudian would have been promptly expelled. In Mexico, where Fromm now resides, there are reports of Fromistas and anti-Fromistas. The Jungians admit no one who does not revere Jung; the Adlerians will brook no criticism of Adler; the Horneyites are brought up on the works of Karen Horney. Can it not be that there is something in the nature



of organizations which lends itself to this spirit of exclusion, and that analysts in this respect differ little from other mortals?

Beyond all this, it has often been pointed out that movements frequently take forms opposed to the wishes of their founders. Jacques Barzun has written a book intended to prove that Darwin was not a Darwinian, Marx was not a Marxist and Wagner was not a Wagnerian. Reik (*Listening with the Third Ear*, 1948, p. 513) quotes Freud as having said to him once: "I am not a Freudian."

Perhaps the most incredible omission in Fromm's tale of Freud's "quasi-political" movement is the record of Freud's own fight with the International, especially the American group, to give full equality to lay analysts. There is a whole chapter in Vol. III of *Jones* devoted to the topic, and Freud's conviction, which he was not in a position to implement, that the opposition to lay analysis is "the last mask of the resistance against psychoanalysis, and the most dangerous of all." (*Jones*, Vol. III, p. 298). Fromm does not have a single word about it.

Fromm engages in such gross over-simplifications of history that he spoils the positive contributions he can offer. He says (pp. 115-116) that:

Freud's total approach to man was part—and perhaps the culmination—of the most important trend in Western thought since the Seventeenth Century: the attempt to grasp and be in touch with reality, and to rid man of the illusions which veil and distort reality...., Kant, Nietzsche, Marx, Darwin, Kierkegaard, Bergson, Joyce, Picasso are other names making the same approach to the undistorted and immediate grasp of reality.... This is the aim of science on the intellectual plane as it is—on the experiential plane—the aim of the purest and most rational forms of monotheistic and particularly of Eastern non-theistic mysticism.

Production of complex historical processes to a specious formula of this sort naturally makes impossible the placing of Freud in proper historical perspective. Freud was, says Fromm, (p. 100), the psychologist of Nineteenth Century society who showed that the assumptions about man underlying the economic system were even more right than the economists could have imagined. His concept of *homo sexualis* was a deepened and broadened version of the economist's concept of *homo economicus* (!). His theoretical picture of man's nature was the same as that of the majority of his contemporaries (p. 100).

Did Freud have nothing new to say? If he was so like his contemporaries, why did they oppose him so bitterly? Fromm scarcely mentions this intense hostility to Freud. And why write a book about him?

Suddenly (p. 115), we are told that Western thought is impregnated with Freud's discoveries, and its future is unthinkable without the fruits of this impregnation. What discoveries? Up to this point the reader has only been told that Freud was as blind as all his colleagues.

Comparable contradictions and inaccuracies dog one at every turn. On the one hand Fromm is described as a typical bourgeois, then on p. 73 Fromm reports how Freud was attracted by a program which sought to fight against the authority of the state and the church where they are committing manifest injustice. When Freud accepts the ideas of Breuer and Fliess he is "oral-receptive"; when he rejects Jung he is "intolerant." On p. 27 Fromm criticizes Freud for



paying no attention to his wife; on p. 24 we are told about how Freud took walks after work with his wife, sister-in-law or daughter.

The clearest expression of the “central dogma” of psychoanalysis is quoted from *The Ego and the Id* (p. 93). This quotation, for which no page reference is given, appears to come from p. 82 (Hogarth Press; translation by Joan Riviere). The original source differs in a number of respects from the citation in Fromm. Two of these differences actually change Freud's meaning. Where Freud speaks of the ego-ideal, Fromm speaks of Super-Ego. And the last sentence is quoted by Fromm as: “Psychoanalysis is the instrument destined for the progressive conquest of the Id.” The text of the Hogarth Press reads: “Psychoanalysis is an instrument to enable the ego to push its conquest of the id further still.” Even apart from these discrepancies, the whole passage is taken out of context.

A passage from a letter to Fliess on Oct. 31, 1897, is quoted in which Freud wrote: “Also sexual excitation is of no more use to a person like me.” From this Fromm concludes that (p. 29) “clearly, at this age sexual life had more or less ended for him.” (p. 29) The reader is not told that the whole letter centers around Freud's self-analysis, which is described as his chief interest at the time. (In fact, Freud's self-analysis and the changes it brought are nowhere clearly discussed, though oblique references are made to them.) And the restoration of libido was certainly one of Freud's goals in analysis. It does not occur to Fromm that in this respect Jones might have been presenting too saintly a picture of Freud to the world.

In this discussion of Freud's quarrels Fromm does not think to ask what kind of men his opponents were. Jung resigned as editor of the *Jahrbuch für psychoanalytische und psychopathologische Forschungen* in 1913. But the same Jung some twenty years later accepted the editorship of the Nazi-controlled *Zentralblatt für Psychotherapie* (Jones, Vol. III, p. 186).

On pp. 63-65 Freud's “intolerance” to Ferenczi is sketched in the orthodox anti-Freudian manner. On p. 85 the same Ferenczi's dictatorial ideas about the formation of the International are described. The contradiction between the all-loving Ferenczi on p. 65 and the dictatorial Ferenczi of p. 85 is not noted by Fromm, even though he presents all the data. And incidentally, Freud's claim that Ferenczi's method might easily lead to sexual indulgence in the hands of unskilled analysts has merit to it which Fromm does not consider. Why deny that some analysts have human failings, and that some are incompetent?

In his review of this book in the *New York Times* on Feb. 1, 1959, Dr. Joost Meerloo wrote: “A biographer's inner motivations move somehow between loving admiration and hidden resentment. Most writers reveal in their biographies more about themselves than about the characters they set out to describe.” This reviewer agrees with Meerloo that Fromm's book tells us more about Fromm than about Freud. It is regrettable that he chose to write it.