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The Humanistic Foundation of Psychoanalysis According to Erich Fromm

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1. Introduction

Dear Colleagues, dear friends of Erich Fromm: I am very much pleased that the opportunity was given to me to speak on Erich Fromm's humanistic foundation of psychoanalysis. It is my conviction that Fromm's humanistic approach and interpretation of psychoanalysis can contribute a lot to the urgent clinical questions in the 1990's. But this is not because Fromm contributed much to the "know how" of the so called psychoanalytic "technique". In his and in my opinion there is a permanent temptation for psychoanalysts to long for more insight and help how to handle this form or that form of neurosis and to neglect the most fundamental aspect: that all psychoanalytic treatment depends on the quality of the relationship between psychoanalyst and patient, that is to say on the psychoanalyst's humanistic attitude to the patient.

Fromm's humanistic attitude is well known to some of you who were analyzed or supervised by him. This personal attitude of Fromm is at the same time the outcome of a humanistic approach to and interpretation of psychoanalysis. All those who have striven to find a common thread running through Fromm's life and work - to put their finger on the quintessential Fromm, as it were - invariably find themselves coming back time and again to the epithet "humanistic". Fromm speaks of humanistic socialism, of humanistic forms of industrial society, of humanistic conscience, of humanistic religion, of humanistic management, of a humanistic weltanschauung, of a humanistic psychoanalysis, of a humanistic character structure, of humanistic ethics, of humanistic guilt feelings and of a humanistic utopia - to name just a few of the expressions typically used by Fromm. Here we find the attribute "humanistic" always being used as a qualification.

I hope that in the course of this commemorative address I will succeed in bringing out what is unique about Fromm's understanding of humanism. I will attempt to redeem this pledge by first dealing with one of the most important historical influences in the development of Frommian humanism, namely with Freud's concept of psychoanalysis, before then going on to talk of Frommian humanism in its own right.

2. The Humanistic Dimension in Psychoanalysis

Besides Jewish spirituality and the Jewish humanism represented by Fromm's talmudic



teachers, Nehemia Nobel of Frankfurt and Salman Baruch Rabinkow of Heidelberg, the other important source of Fromm's humanistic philosophy is to be found in the humanistic dimensions implicit in psychoanalysis. This no less than the first source can be traced back to a person he was closely associated with. In this case it was Frieda Reichmann, who Fromm not only gained his first experiences in psychoanalysis from - on the couch, as it were - but who he was later to collaborate with in opening a joint psychoanalytic practice in Heidelberg at No. 15 Mönchhofstrasse in 1924. However, it is not my intention here to trace the significant influence exercised on Fromm's humanistic unfolding by adopting an historical approach to Frieda Reichmann's mediating role. Rather what I propose to do is to tackle the matter systematically, by taking a look at the statements Fromm was later to make on this particular aspect of psychoanalysis.

"Freud expressed his humanism primarily in his concept of the unconscious. He assumed that all men share the same unconscious strivings, and hence that they can understand each other once they dare to delve into the underworld of the unconscious." (E. Fromm, 1962a, p. 17). Freud also pointed out the way for psychoanalysis to uncover the workings of the unconscious: "It posits that, by penetrating through the defenses and obstructions erected by conscious thought, the unconscious reality behind the screen of consciousness can be reached and laid bare." (E. Fromm, 1963f, p. 75) Indeed, for Fromm, it is precisely the insight into things we are not normally conscious of that leads to the remarkable discovery that human beings in all societies and in social strata, despite appearing to differ considerably in what they are consciously aware of (i.e. their conscious intentions, desires, fears, convictions, passions, codes of behavior, etc.) are in reality not so different after all when our understanding of man is widened to include the unconscious as well.

To put it in Fromm's own words: Freud built his system "around the assumption of an universal human essence, i.e. for him there was more to human beings than the way they were manifested in their various cultural settings; rather there exists an essential human core about which universally valid empirical knowledge can be attained." (E. Fromm, 1970d, p.30.) Only by incorporating the unconscious into our view of man can human beings be perceived in the round; only then can the individual human being be a representative of universal man. Thus there is such a thing as a "model of human nature" (Fromm borrowed this concept from Spinoza) on the basis of which knowledge of the basic shared aspects of human nature becomes a possibility. Thus, ever since its inception, psychoanalysis has adhered to the basic humanistic standpoint "that each man represents the whole of humanity; hence, there is nothing human that can be alien to him" (E. Fromm, 1962a, p. 17).

The postulate that the whole person, i.e. man in both his conscious and unconscious aspects, represents the whole of humanity and hence universal mankind, finds its best confirmation in our dreams. When we are asleep and are therefore released from the expectations and necessities of our day-to-day lives and the struggle to survive, we find that we revert to a language that all people can "speak" equally well: the symbolical language our dreams are coded in. "Dreams are the universal language of mankind," are Fromm's own uncompromising words here (Cf. E. Fromm 1972a, GA IX). Moreover, this symbolic language is the sole universal language by means of which we humans can reliably communicate with each other - to the extent, that is, that we have not forgotten it for historical reasons. Through our dreams our unconscious is able to speak to us; this



gives us the chance to regain our wholeness, which is a *conditio sine qua non* if nothing human is ever to be alien to us.

"The state of sleep," says Fromm in his book *The Forgotten Language*, written in 1951, "has an ambiguous function. In it, the fact that we are cut loose from our culture allows both our worst and our best sides to come out; thus, during our dreams we can be less intelligent, less wise and less decent than in our waking lives; on the other hand, we can also be better and wiser than we are then." (E. Fromm, 1951a, p.36.) But if this is so, if our unconscious really does have this dual aspect, then the conclusion follows that the unconscious "always represents the whole man in the whole gamut of his potentialities, both for darkness and for light." (E. Fromm, 1963f., p. 77.) "What is contained in the unconscious, then, is not just good or evil, the rational or the irrational; both are contained there; there we find all that is human. The unconscious is the whole man - minus that part of man which corresponds to his society. The consciousness represents social man, i.e. man subject to the accidental limitations imposed by the historical situation into which an individual is thrown. Unconsciousness represents the universal man, the whole man rooted in the Cosmos." (E. Fromm, 1963f., p. 77.)

The humanistic dimension in psychoanalysis is interpreted by Fromm in a quite distinctive fashion. As he came to see it, the unconscious represent man in all his possibilities and potentialities; on the other hand, the conscious mind can only acquaint us with the partial aspects corresponding to a particular situation in a particular culture that we happen to be caught up in. In my opinion, this view of the unconscious offered by Fromm represents a radical new understanding of humanism - though, to be sure, it has its inspirational antecedents. Nonetheless, it would be fair to say that it represents a clean break with the humanism of the ancient world, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. If one is to point to any sources, they should rather be sought in the mystic currents Fromm had imbibed above all from his experience of the flesh-and-blood, lived-out Habad Hasidism of his Talmudic teacher, Rabinkov. In the following part of my address, I would now like to attempt to bring out the unique features of Fromm's understanding of humanism and his humanistic foundation of psychoanalysis.

3. Erich Fromm' Conception of Humanism

Let us begin with the common ground possessed by all men which for Fromm represents the fundamental premise the idea of a single humanity and the universal man is based on. "The whole concept of humanity and of humanism is based on the idea of a human nature in which all men share," says Fromm (1962a, p. 27). Is there such a thing as "human nature"? What do all men have in common? In his "humanistic credo" set out at the end of his book *Beyond the Chains of Illusion* (1962a, p. 178) he declares: "I believe that every man represents humanity. We may differ with respect to intelligence, health and talents. But yet we are all one. We are all saints and sinners, adults and children, and no one can set himself up as anybody's superior and judge him." This profession of belief means no less than that the "human condition (*conditio humana*) "is one and the same for all men, despite unavoidable differences in intelligence, talents, height and skin color" (E. Fromm, 1964a, p. 93).

With the attainment of this insight that what links human beings together is the fact of their sharing a single "human condition", Fromm's argumentation has reached a key



junction. What ties all men together and therefore constitutes their very essence is not the fact that they possess certain abilities by virtue of which they can set themselves off both from each other and from their animal ancestry. Nor, by the same token, can the essence of man be found in those attributes that have been traditionally advanced in an effort to define man - i.e. humanism is not predicated on man being a rational animal, a social animal, homo faber, homo ludens, or a zoon politikon. Nor is it to be found in the multifarious adaptations evolved by man in the course of his cultural development as a response to the problems posed by life. These do not represent the essence of our "human nature" and therefore cannot be taken as a starting point, or made a precondition, for attaining the universal man. As Fromm puts it: "It is the questions, not the answers, that are the essence of man." (E. Fromm, 1968g, p. 9.)

After Fromm has thus answered this central question of humanism concerning the essential unity of man based on his sharing in a common nature, he then goes on to link this up with his concept of the unconscious, according to which the unconscious always represents the whole man in all his many-sided potentiality. Human beings as a species are marked by pressing existential contradictions and needs that leave them no choice but to attempt an answer to them. This being so, the next step is to recognize that the unconscious contains in itself the whole spectrum of possible answers, meaning that person has to make a decision as to which of his many possibilities are to be encouraged and which discouraged and suppressed. Nonetheless, it is a fact that "man, in any culture, is faced by a gamut of possibilities: he is the archaic man, the beast of prey, the cannibal, the idolater; but he is also the being with the capacity for reason, for love, for justice." (E. Fromm, 1963f, p. 27.)

In his unconscious, therefore, man finds that he has infinite possibilities at his disposal; and the question is only, which of these are to be followed up and which passed over? Since man by his very nature is a social being, this means that the kind of society a person lives in will decide which possibilities are to be furthered. Every society channels the energies of its members in such a way as to make them want to do what the society needs them to do anyway. "Social necessities become transformed into personal needs, into the "social character." (Loc. cit. pp. 75-76.) A person living in a warlike society is made to want to attack and plunder; a person living in a modern industrialized society is made to work hard, exercise discipline, be ambitious and aggressive - he is left with no choice but to want to spend his money and engage in consumption. Not, to be sure, because it is in conformity with his nature, but because a specific society needs him to behave in this way if it is to function.

Every society not only seeks to promote a subset of the possibilities latent in the human unconscious by bringing these into consciousness and getting the individual to identify with them, but at the same time it actively suppresses and represses the any remaining possibilities and inclinations that fail to conform with the socially accepted codes of behavior, i.e. the so-called "social character". (The reason why men are so pliant in this regard, so willing to play along with what society expects of them, is traced back by Fromm to the deep-seated dread of ostracization and marginalization, of isolation and loneliness, that haunts all men. The individual person suppresses whatever experiences and modes of feeling have been declared taboo in his society, because he is afraid that the price of not playing along with society's expectations will be ending up utterly isolated - and complete isolation is tantamount to complete insanity.) Thus it



comes about that "our conscious mind represents mainly our own society and culture, while our unconscious represents the universal man in each of us" (E. Fromm, 1964a, p. 93).

It is not what divides men off from each another - not the wide range of historically conditioned answers or socially prescribed behavior patterns - that constitutes the essence of man and has the power to bind all men together. Rather we discover our true essence partly in the shared questions confronting all men, i.e. in the existential contradictions and imperatives that are our lot; and also partly in the fact that the unconscious represents the universal man in his entirety, i.e. man endowed with the full gamut of innate possibilities. Only in his unconscious is man able to experience the whole of humanity; only here can he experience himself as being at once "saint and sinner, child and adult, sane and insane, man as he was in the past and man as he will be in the future" (E. Fromm, 1964a, p. 93). Since this is so, humanism is able to derive its ultimate legitimation from the humanistic experience itself, i.e. from the experience - productive and humanizing at the one and the same time - of shedding the light of consciousness on the unconscious. "This humanistic experience consists in the feeling that nothing human is alien to one, that "I am you", that one can understand another human being because both of us share as our common possession the same elements of human existence...The broadening of self-awareness the humanistic experience brings about - including as it does the transcending of consciousness and the revelation of the sphere of the social unconscious - enables man to experience himself in the full dimensions of his shared humanity." (Loc. cit. p.93.)

If it is true that the unconscious represents the universal man as an integral whole, then it follows that "making the unconscious conscious enables what would otherwise remain as the mere idea of the universalizability of man to be taken and transformed into a living experience, meaning no less than that the humanitas is realized on the experiential level...Experiencing my unconscious is tantamount to experiencing my own humanity; and this is what makes it possible for me to say to every human being, "You and I are one and the same. I can understand you in all your fundamental qualities, in all your good and your bad points, even when you go off the deep end, precisely because I find that all this is in me too."" (E. Fromm, 1963f, pp. 77-78.)

From this insight that, independently of social consciousness and what society represses from consciousness, it is actually the unconscious that represents the whole person in all his potential, Fromm is able to go on and derive a justification for his basic humanistic conviction of the unity of man that embraces much more than merely theoretical dimensions. For the moment a person tunes into his unconscious, the moment he opens himself up to his unconscious and thus the world of possibilities slumbering within him, he will find that he starts to unfold and grow. Even more, he will make his own the paradoxical but personally productive experience (Fromm would insist that this is the humanistic experience period) that he is now able to relate to the world and other people in a way which is both loving and rational - for now he finds that things formerly alien have shed their aura of alienation. Only by opening myself up to the unconscious (i.e. the integral person in me), only by actualizing my individuality can I attain to experience of the universal man; for " only the fully developed individual self can abandon the ego" (E. Fromm, 1962a, p. 178.)

What Fromm found so particularly compelling about humanism, that induced him



to use the attribute "humanistic" on so many occasions - indeed made him press for a renaissance of the humanist credo - is essentially bound up with the humanistic dimensions implicit in accessing the unconscious to the light of consciousness. For him what is fundamentally at stake is the achieving of a new humanism, this time conceived of as the unfolding of the loving and rational forces inherent in each person; it is the achieving of a new humanistic orientation and perspective along the lines laid down in his analysis of character types under the notions of psychological productivity and the productive attitude to life. This psychological productivity is manifested whenever a person opens himself up to his own unconscious forces, so that he comes to experience them as forces uniquely his own. The more a person succeeds in experiencing himself at once as architect, actor and subject of his own life, i.e. the more he becomes someone who is able to think, feel and act with the full weight of these inner forces behind him, the more he will find his loving and thinking forces within him developing in tandem, so that he will now find that he can give himself to another person or devote himself to worldly affairs without fear of losing himself in the process. Nor does making man aware of himself in his integral wholeness leave the unconscious forces in man unchanged; rather they now spring directly from man's own humanity. Only when man develops an authentic self based on his encounter with these forces within will he find he is now capable of loving others without having to renounce love of self. For now he will find himself again, though this time reflected in others, and so without doing violence either to his own integrity or to the integrity of others (this is essentially what Fromm means by "productive love"). As a result, he will now be able to channel the full force of his subjectivity into the task of perceiving reality in its full objectivity (this is what Fromm calls "productive reason").

Hence the paramount importance Fromm attaches to elucidating the humanistic experience with the help of such notions as reason and love, since these are precisely the inner forces of man that are most clearly directed to promoting his psychological growth and unfolding; moreover, these inner forces are the means by which man experiences and strives to achieve his universal humanity. Reason and love are the product of the living experience of making the unconscious conscious. Reason is therefore something different from mere "know-how"; but neither is it the judgmental apprehension of reality; reason has for Fromm no connection with "manipulative intelligence" or "instrumental intelligence". Rather, what is meant by reason is the capacity for attaining integrated, integral experience of inner and outer reality. Since reason has its seat in the whole person dwelling in the unconscious, it does not behave in line with the logic of causality - but rather in line with the logic of the paradoxical. By this is meant the capacity to experience one's unity with the object of contemplation - whether it be a rose or a cat - and to do this so completely that this rationally apprehended reality is now stripped of its alien appearance, of its aura of otherness. Then the rose or the cat become on a deeper level aspects of oneself, not divided off but essentially part of the same single bipolar unity.

That the individual person is capable of reason of this kind will be manifested, if it is to be manifested at all, in the ability to apprehend reality as an aspect of oneself, i.e. as one's true home, as something deeply familiar and rooted, as something living and vitalizing, as something one is not divided off from, as something burningly present and real. The greater one's capacity is for reason, the more one's fear of facing up to outer and



inner reality will fade away. At the same time, one's sense of alienation and precariousness will vanish, and the gap between outer and inner dimensions of reality - the world of objective truth and subjective feeling - will become redundant.

The same holds true for the humanistic power of love inherent in each individual. This is no less than the capacity to sense that one is in touch with all one's intellectual, emotional and physical forces and that these form a single unity in oneself. When such a positive resonance has been built up with one's self - call it "love of self" if you like - it will then be possible to sense that one is part of the same fundamental unity of which other people and nature are other parts - albeit without renouncing one's self in the process and without forcing other people to abandon their essential otherness either. Love may be looked at as the capacity to experience what is alien and other as a part of oneself; at the same time, it is the capacity to experience what is part of oneself as alien and other; furthermore, it is also the capacity to feel united with the other by virtue of experiencing the other as a part of oneself.

But perhaps the difference between productive humanistic experience and non-productive experience is nowhere more graphically evidenced than in the conflicting notions of science. From the perspective of a humanistically conceived science of man, things normally seen as being opposites turn out not to be so at all. The self and the other, myself and yourself, subject and object, inner and outer, for example, are now revealed as not truly opposed at all, but rather as complementarities locked in an essential interdependence - the more I am myself, the more I am you; and the less I am myself, the less I am you. At the same time, from the standpoint of a humanistically conceived science the opposition between "productive" and "non-productive" comes to be recognized as real and unbridgeable, i.e. the one does indeed rule out the other. This is not a matter of "more or less" but of "either/or": either the passions of man are non-productive (and orientated to Having) or they are productive (and orientated to Being). But, for a non-humanistically conceived science of man, exactly the opposite applies: the self and the other, myself and yourself, subject and object, inner and outer, which initially appear to be real opposites, in fact turn out to be just this. This crucial difference is worth dwelling on. For, from a non-humanistic standpoint, the business of science is seen as consisting in the endeavor to differentiate endlessly, to specialize, to fragment, to atomize, to demarcate, to bolster up one's own position, to get one's own way, to prevail at all costs, to make oneself invulnerable against criticism. On the other hand, the "productive/non-productive" oppositional pair is construed as meaning mutual complementarity and interdependence: the less you give of yourself and the more acquire, the more you are.

What I have just touched on in connection with our scientific understanding as a whole, can be illustrated equally well in the respective branches of science. There is a humanistic mode of interacting with reality that is characterized by productive love and reason; by the same token, there are also non-productive ways of interacting with reality. Whenever Fromm intends us to understand the productive mode of thinking, feeling and acting, he falls back on the attribute "humanistic" to refer to a humane way of relating to reality.

The unconscious as the whole person. This, then, is the key insight informing the Frommian restatement of humanism. This, then, is what his commitment to a truly productive mode of experience is predicated on - an experience that is to be as rooted in



being as it is on the side of life.

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