Theories of Personality

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The most beautiful as well as the most ugly inclinations of man are not part of a fixed and biologically given human nature, but result from the social processes which create man.

—Erich Fromm

With Erich Fromm we meet a theorist who, along with Adler and Horney, is often referred to as a social-psychological theorist. As the opening quote indicates, Fromm shares with the aforementioned theorists a basic disagreement with Freud. Humanity, Fromm argues, is not inexorably driven or inevitably shaped by biological forces of an instinctive nature. Fromm also takes issue with Freud on the matter of sex; Fromm does not view it as a primary shaping force in either normal or neurotic behavior. Instead, Fromm sees our personality as influenced by social and cultural forces—both those that affect an individual within a culture and those universal forces that have influenced humanity throughout
history. Thus, his stress on the social determinants of personality is broader than that of Adler or Horney. His goal is to develop "a theory of the various human passions as resulting from the conditions of the existence of man." Believing that an individual creates his or her own nature, Fromm feels that we must examine the history of mankind in order to understand that creation.

Note that Fromm says that people create their own natures. He rejects the notion that we are passively shaped by social forces, arguing that we shape the social forces ourselves. These forces act, in turn, to influence the personality.

We might say that Fromm takes a longer view of the development of the individual personality than other theorists do because of his concern with the history of mankind as well as the history of the individual. Because of our history, Fromm argues, modern people suffer from feelings of loneliness, isolation, and insignificance. Our basic needs, therefore, are to escape these feelings of isolation, to develop a sense of belonging, and to find meaning in life. Paradoxically, the increased freedom that mankind has achieved over the centuries—both from nature and from rigid social systems—has led to more intense feelings of loneliness and isolation. Too much freedom becomes a negative condition from which we attempt to flee.

Fromm believes that the kinds of conflicts that people suffer arise from the kind of society they have constructed. However, we are not irrevocably doomed to suffering. Quite the contrary is true; Fromm remains optimistic about our ability to solve our problems—problems that we ourselves have created.

While Fromm is a psychoanalyst (the first in our coverage without a medical degree), he is also a philosopher, a historian, and an anthropologist. He draws on data from many sources beyond the analytical couch, which makes it difficult to classify him neatly as a member of any single discipline.

The Life of Fromm (1900–)

Fromm was born in Frankfurt, Germany, of a family deeply steeped in Orthodox Judaism. His father was a businessman, but his grandfather was a rabbi and his mother's uncle a well-known Talmudic scholar. As a child, Fromm was a devoted student of the Old Testament, the moral fervor of which influenced him greatly in his youth. Like Freud, the young Fromm was infused with the Jewish tradition of reason and intellectual activity and experienced the emotional impact of being a member of

a minority group. In later life, Fromm severed all connection with organized religion and became what he described as an “atheistic mystic,” but there is no denying the influence of his early religious experiences.

Little has been written about Fromm’s early childhood. He was an only child (which should give pause to those of you who are enamored of Adler’s theory), and his early home life was described as tense. He recalls that his father was given to moodiness and was highly anxious and that his mother was prone to bouts of depression.

If we are searching for experiences and events that could have presaged his adult view of mankind, perhaps we should begin at a later age with Fromm. For example, when he was 12, he was greatly upset by the suicide of a family friend, a talented and beautiful woman. In his adolescent years, he was confused and shocked by several such tragedies, both individual and societal, and particularly by the horrors of World War I (which began when he was 14). It was not only the deaths of millions (including friends and relatives) on the battlefields of Europe that disturbed him but also the atmosphere of hate, hysteria, and fanaticism that pervaded Germany.

Fromm’s growing interest in political theory was reinforced by the chaotic social conditions in Germany following the war and, later, by the rise of Nazism. He became a socialist in attitude (although he never joined the party) and studied widely in the social sciences at Heidelberg. He became quite knowledgeable in the works of Karl Marx, Max Weber, Herbert Spencer, and other leading economic, social and political theorists.

Seeking the answer to the riddle of human motivation, Fromm underwent psychoanalytic training in Munich and at the Psychoanalytic Institute in Berlin, where he was trained along orthodox Freudian lines. Still troubled by the suicide in his childhood, he felt that Freud’s view “seemed to be the answer to a puzzling and frightening experience.”

This answer, however, did not satisfy him for very long. In the 1930s, he began to write articles that were critical of Freud—particularly of Freud’s refusal to admit the impact of socioeconomic forces on personality. In 1934, he emigrated to the United States to escape the Nazi menace and became associated with Karen Horney and Harry Stack Sullivan.

Fromm’s theory has been presented—and, at this writing, is still being presented—in a number of books offered in a popular style, more for the public than for colleagues. Some of these books have been extremely popular, reaching best-seller status. Fromm has lectured at several universities in the United States during his career and since 1951 has made his home in Mexico City. He is a professor at the University of Mexico and is director of the Mexican Psychoanalytic Institute.

Mankind's Basic Condition: Loneliness and Insignificance

The title of Fromm's first book, *Escape from Freedom*, provides us with an indication of his vision of the basic human condition. In the history of Western civilization, Fromm believes, as people have gained more freedom, they have come to feel more lonely, insignificant, and alienated from one another. Conversely, the less freedom people have had, the greater have been their feelings of belongingness and security. Thus, freedom would seem to be antithetical to our needs for security and identification. It is Fromm's contention that modern people, possessing greater freedom than has been offered in any other era, feel more lonely, alienated, and insignificant than people of ages past.

To fully understand what Fromm means by this apparent paradox, we must examine briefly the history of Western civilization, as Fromm interprets it. He begins by discussing our evolution from the lower animals and noting the basic distinction between animal nature and human nature: people are free of the instinctive biological mechanisms that guide the animal's every move. The lower an animal is on the phylogenetic scale, the more firmly fixed the pattern and form of its behavior. The higher the animal, the more flexible its behaviors. Human beings, as the highest animals, have the greatest flexibility of all. Our actions are the least tied to instinctive mechanisms.

But there is more to us than greater flexibility of behavior. We know; we are conscious and aware of ourselves and the world around us. Through learning, we accumulate a knowledge of the past. Through imagination we can go far beyond the present. Because we know, because we master nature, we are no longer at one with nature, as are the lower animals. As Fromm put it, we have transcended nature. As a result, while still a part of nature, in that we are subject to its physical laws (and can't change them), we are separate from nature—homeless, as it were.

Unlike the other animals, we realize how powerless we are ultimately; we know that we will die. And we know how different we are from the other animals. Looked at in one way, this knowledge of being separate and apart from the rest of nature is a kind of freedom. Our mind gives us infinite choice. But looked at in another way, this separateness spells alienation from the rest of nature. Human beings cannot revert to animal status; we cannot free ourselves of knowledge, of the mind. What, then, can we do? How can we escape the feelings of isolation and apartness?

Fromm said that early peoples tried to escape their state of alienation from nature by identifying fully with their tribes or clans. Sharing myths, religions, and tribal rites and customs, they obtained the security of belonging to a group. Membership in the group provided acceptance,
affiliation, and a set of rules to follow. The religions that early peoples developed helped them, to some degree, to re-establish their link with nature. The focus of worship was on objects in nature: sun, moon, fire, animals, and plants.

But this tenuous security could not last. Human beings are striving creatures who develop and grow, and postprimitive people revolted against this subservience to the group. Indeed, each period of history, according to Fromm, has been characterized by increasing individuality (a process Fromm called individuation) as people have struggled toward ever-greater independence and freedom to grow, to develop, and to use all of their uniquely human abilities. The process of individuation reached its peak somewhere between the period of the Reformation and the present day—a time during which great alienation and aloneness have been matched by a high degree of freedom. (Actually, we should say caused by a high degree of freedom.)

Fromm designated the Middle Ages as the last era of stability, security, and belongingness. It was a time of little individual freedom, since the feudal system rigidly defined every person’s place in society. One remained in the role and status to which one was born; there was no mobility, either social or geographic. The individual had little choice of occupation, social customs, habits of dress, and the like. Everything was determined by the class into which one was born and by the rigid rules of the Catholic Church.

Yet, although people were decidedly not free, they were not isolated, not alienated from others. The rigid social structure meant that the individual’s place in society was clearly delineated. There was no doubt or indecision on anyone’s part as to where or to whom one belonged.

Fromm argues that the social upheavals brought on by the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation destroyed this stability and security by considerably enlarging people’s freedom. People began to have more choice and power over their own lives. Of course, they achieved this greater freedom at the expense of the ties that had provided security and a sense of belonging. As a result, they became beset by doubts about the meaning of life and by feelings of personal insignificance.

Fromm characterizes the increasing freedom of Western people as a freedom from but not a freedom to. We have become free from slavery and bondage, but, because of the increased insecurity and alienation, we are not free to develop our full potentialities and enjoy this new freedom. Fromm has been especially critical of the American "marketplace" culture, in which we are quite free from many strictures but not free to develop the full essence of our selves. We find ourselves in quite a dilemma. How can we flee the sense of loneliness and insignificance? How can we escape from freedom?

Mechanisms of Escape

Fromm tells us that there are basically two approaches we can take in our attempts to find meaning and belongingness in life.

The first method, achieving *positive freedom*, involves the attempt to become reunited with other people without, at the same time, giving up one’s freedom and integrity. In this optimistic and altruistic approach, Fromm sees us as relating to others through work and love—through the sincere and open expression of our emotional and intellectual abilities. In this kind of society, which Fromm calls a *humanistic* one, no one would feel lonely and insignificant, because all people would be brothers and sisters.

The other way to regain security is by *renouncing freedom* and surrendering completely our individuality and integrity. Obviously, such a solution will not lead to self-expression and personal development. It does, however, remove the anxiety of loneliness and insignificance and explain, according to Fromm, why so many people are willing to accept a *totalitarian* system such as the Nazi regime in the 1930s.

In addition to these general approaches to regaining lost security, Fromm posits specific mechanisms of escape—“psychic mechanisms”—which he feels are analogous to Horney’s neurotic character traits.

The first mechanism, *authoritarianism*, manifests itself in either masochistic or sadistic strivings. Individuals described as *masochistic* feel themselves to be inferior and inadequate. While they may complain of these feelings and say that they would like to be rid of them, they actually feel a strong need for dependence, either on one person or on an institution. They willingly submit to the control of other people or of social forces and behave in a weak and helpless manner toward others. They gain security by these acts of submission and thus assuage their feelings of loneliness.

The *sadistic* striving, although the opposite of the masochistic, is found in the same kind of person, Fromm said. It represents, basically, a striving for power over others. There are three ways in which the sadistic striving may be expressed. In one way, the person makes others totally dependent on himself or herself so as to have absolute power over them. A second sadistic expression goes beyond ruling or dictating to others. It involves exploiting others by taking or using anything desirable that they possess—whether material things or intellectual or emotional qualities. The third form of sadistic expression involves the desire to see others suffer and to be the cause of that suffering. While the suffering may involve actual physical pain, it most often involves emotional suffering, such as humiliation or embarrassment.

The second escape mechanism Fromm calls *destructiveness*, which is

the opposite of authoritarianism. While the first mechanism, in either
the sadistic or the masochistic expression, involves some form of continu-
ing interaction with an object, destructiveness aims at the elimination
of the object. A destructive person says to himself or herself, in effect:
"I can escape the feeling of my own powerlessness in comparison with
the world outside myself by destroying that world." Fromm saw evi-
dence of destructiveness, albeit disguised or rationalized, everywhere
in the world. Indeed, he felt that virtually everything was used as a
rationalization for destructiveness, including love, duty, conscience, and
patriotism.

The third escape mechanism, described by Fromm as having the
most important social significance, is automation conformity. Through this
mechanism, a person eases his or her loneliness and isolation by erasing
any and all differences between himself or herself and others. He or
she accomplishes this by becoming just like everyone else, by conforming
unconditionally to the rules that govern behavior. Fromm compared this
mechanism with the protective coloring of certain animals. By being indis-
tinguishable from their surroundings, the animals protect themselves. So
it is with fully conforming human beings.

While such persons do temporarily gain the security and sense of
belonging so desperately needed, it is at the price of the self. One who
so totally conforms to others no longer has a self; there is no longer an "I," as distinct from "them." The person becomes "them," and a false
self takes the place of the genuine self. And this loss of self, the surrender
of "I," may leave the person in worse shape than he or she was in before.
The individual is now beset by new insecurities and doubts. No longer
having any identity of his or her own, no real self, the person is no
more than a reflexive response to what others expect of him or her. The
new identity, a false one, can be obtained and maintained only through
constant conformity. There must be no relaxation, no slipups; approval
and recognition from others would be lost if he or she did anything
at variance with their norms and values.

We have seen so far the basic nature of human beings as viewed
by Fromm. Historically and socially shaped, we must strike a balance
between freedom and security so that we can form a self without ex-
periencing loneliness and alienation. This ideal state has not yet been
achieved.

But there is more to Fromm's personality theory than mechanisms
of escape from freedom. There are additional aspects of personality that
result from the social order in which we live and from our attempts
to cope with it. To understand these factors, we must discuss the develop-
ment of the individual, just as we discussed the historical development
of mankind.
The Development of the Individual

Fromm believes that the development of the individual in childhood parallels the pattern of development of mankind. In a sense, the history of the species is repeated in the childhood of each individual, in that, as the child grows, he or she gains increasing independence and freedom. And the less dependent the child becomes on the primary ties with the mother, the less secure he or she feels. The infant knows virtually no freedom but is secure in its dependent relationship.

Fromm feels that some degree of isolation and helplessness always accompanies the maturation process and that the child will attempt to regain his or her former primary ties with security. In a very real sense, the child attempts to escape from his or her own growing freedom through several mechanisms similar to those described in the preceding section. Which mechanism the child uses is determined by the nature of the parent-child relationship. Fromm proposed three types of escape mechanisms: symbiotic relatedness, withdrawal-destructiveness, and love.

In symbiotic relatedness, the person never achieves a state of independence. Rather, he or she escapes aloneness and insecurity by becoming a part of someone else, either by “swallowing” or by being swallowed by that other person. Masochistic behavior arises from being swallowed. The child remains totally dependent on the parents and abnegates his or her self. Sadism arises from the reverse situation (swallowing) in which the parents give all authority to the child by submitting to his or her will on every issue. The child regains security by manipulating and exploiting the parents. Whether the child is doing the swallowing or being swallowed, the relationship is one of closeness and intimacy. The child really needs the parents for security.

The withdrawal-destructiveness interaction, in contrast, is characterized by a distance and separation from others. Fromm stated that withdrawal and destructiveness are simply the passive and active forms of the same type of relatedness with the parents. Which form the child’s behavior takes depends on the behavior of the parents. For example, parents who act destructively toward the child, attempting to subordinate or subjugate him or her, cause the child to withdraw from them.

Love, the third form of interaction, is the most desirable form of parent-child relatedness. In this case, the parents provide the greatest opportunity for the child to develop his or her self by offering respect and a proper balance between security and responsibility. As a result, the child feels little need to escape his or her growing freedom and is able to love himself or herself and others.

Fromm agrees with Freud that the first five years of life are of extreme importance, but he does not believe that personality is firmly fixed.

by the age of 5. Later events, Fromm argues, can be just as effective in influencing personality as early events. He also agrees with Freud in viewing the family as the “psychic agency” or representative of society to the child. It is through interaction with the family that the child acquires his or her character and ways of adjusting to society. While there are differences in every family, Fromm felt that most people in a given culture have a common social character—a common set of mores and beliefs that define the proper way of behaving for that culture. The child develops this social character, as well as his or her own individual character, from the unique interactions with the parents plus his or her genetic endowment. This, Fromm feels, explains why different people react to the same environment in different ways.

Overall, it is the complex of social-environmental experiences—especially how the child is treated by the parents—that determines the nature of the adult personality, although not irrevocably so.

**Human Needs**

As living organisms, people have a number of basic physiological needs that must be satisfied in order to assure survival. These needs—for example, for food, water, and sex—are no different for us than for other animals in terms of their nature and origin. However, we differ from lower animals in two respects. In the first place, we do not satisfy these needs in “instinctive” fashion—that is, by following rigid behavior patterns. Our behavior is infinitely varied and flexible, since it is learned by each individual in his or her unique environment. The other difference is that we are motivated by a second set of needs—those of a psychological nature—which are socially created and vary greatly from one individual to another.

However, Fromm felt that the drive for security (to escape loneliness) and the conflicting drive for freedom (to create the self) are universal. The choice between regression to security on the one hand and progression to freedom on the other is inescapable. All human cravings are determined by this polarity. Fromm postulated the existence of five needs that result from this dichotomy: relatedness, transcendence, rootedness, identity, and frame of reference.

The need for relatedness arises from the disruption of our primary ties with nature. By virtue of the powers of reason and imagination, the individual is aware of his or her separation from nature, his or her powerlessness, and the arbitrary nature of birth and death. Because people have lost their former instinctive relationship with nature, they must use reason and imagination to create a new relatedness with fellow human
beings. The ideal way of achieving this relatedness is through what Fromm calls *productive love*, which involves care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge. In loving, a person is concerned with another’s growth and happiness, responds to the other’s needs, and respects and knows the loved one as he or she really is.

Productive love can be directed toward the same sex (brotherly love), toward fusion and oneness with a member of the opposite sex (erotic love), or toward one’s child (motherly love). In all three forms, the person’s ultimate concern is with the development and growth of the other person’s self.

*Transcendence* refers to the need to rise above the passive-animal state, with which people cannot be satisfied because of their reason and imagination. People must become creative and productive individuals. In the act of creation, whether of life (as in having children), of material objects, of art, or of ideas, we surpass the animal state and enter into a state of freedom and purposiveness. Fromm also indicates quite clearly that, if the creative need is blocked for any reason, people become destructive; that is the only alternative to creativeness. Destructiveness, like creativeness, is in our nature. Both tendencies satisfy the need for transcendence. Creativity, however, is the primary tendency.

The human need for *rootedness* also arises from the loss of our primary ties with nature. As a result of that loss, we stand detached and alone; we must establish new roots in our relationships with others to replace our previous roots in nature. Feelings of brotherliness with others, according to Fromm, are the most satisfying kind of new roots we can develop.

In addition to the needs for rootedness and relatedness, for a sense of belonging, people need a sense of *identity* as unique individuals. There are several ways of achieving this sense of identity. For example, a productive and creative person could develop his or her talents and abilities to the fullest, or he or she could identify himself or herself with a group—a religion, a union, or a nation—perhaps to the point of conformity.

The need for a *frame of reference* stems from our powers of reason and imagination, which require a framework for making sense of all the puzzling phenomena to which we are exposed. We must develop a consistent and coherent picture of the world by which we are able to perceive and understand all that is going on around us. This frame of reference may be based on rational or irrational considerations (or a combination of the two). The important thing is the consistency and coherence with which it is maintained.

The manner in which these five needs are manifested or satisfied depends on social conditions and opportunities afforded by the culture. Thus, the way in which a person copes with or adjusts to his or her

Chapter 5

society is a sort of compromise that the individual works out between these needs and the social conditions in which he or she lives. As a result of this compromise (or series of compromises), the person develops his or her personality structure—what Fromm called orientations or character traits.

**Character Traits**

Fromm proposed that the character traits underlie all behavior and are powerful forces by which a person relates or orients himself or herself to the world. He describes the traits in separate terms, but he is careful to note that the personality or character of an individual is a blend of some or all of these traits, although one usually plays a dominant role.

The traits are divided into nonproductive and productive types. Nonproductive traits include the receptive, exploitative, hoarding, and marketing orientations.

Individuals with *receptive orientations* expect to get whatever they want—be it love, knowledge, or pleasure—from some outside source—an other person, an authority, or a system. They are receivers in their relations with others, needing to be loved rather than loving and taking rather than creating ideas or knowledge.

Obviously, such people are highly dependent on others and indeed feel quite paralyzed when left on their own; they feel incapable of doing anything without outside help. There is a similarity between this orientation and Freud’s oral incorporative type, the receptive orientation also finding relief in eating and drinking. The kind of society that fosters this trait is one in which exploitation of one group by another (for example, slave by master) is practiced.

In the *exploitative orientation*, the person is also directed toward others for what he or she wants. However, instead of expecting to receive from others, these people take from them, either by force or by cunning. Indeed, if something is given to them, they see it as worthless. They want only what belongs to and is valued by others: wives or husbands, ideas, possessions, and so on. What has to be stolen or taken by force has much greater value than what is given freely. This trait is similar to Freud’s oral aggressive type and can be seen in robber barons, fascist leaders, or domineering people in any setting.

As the name indicates, in the *hoarding orientation* the person derives his or her security from the amount he or she can hoard and save. This miserly behavior applies not only to money and material possessions but also to emotions and thoughts. In a sense, such people build walls around themselves and sit there, surrounded by all that they have hoard-

ed, protecting it from outside intrusion and letting as little of it out as possible. There is an obvious parallel here with the Freudian anal retentive type.

Fromm said that this kind of orientation was particularly common in the 18th and 19th centuries in those countries that had stable middle-class economies characterized by the Puritan ethic of thrift, conservatism, and sober business practices.

The marketing orientation is a 20th-century phenomenon characteristic of capitalist societies, particularly the United States. In a commodity-based marketplace culture, Fromm argued, people’s success or failure depends on how well they sell themselves. The set of values is the same for personalities as for commodities; indeed, one’s personality becomes a commodity to be sold. Thus, it is not so much one’s personal qualities, skills, knowledge, or integrity that counts but rather how nice a “package” one is.

Such an orientation cannot produce any feeling of security, because the person is left without genuine relatedness to others. Indeed, if the game is played long enough, there is no longer even a relatedness to or real awareness of one’s self. The packaged role the individual is forced to play completely obscures his or her own genuine qualities and characteristics, not only from others but from the person himself or herself. As a result, such people find themselves in a state of total alienation, with no personal core or center and with no real relationship to those around them.

Fromm’s fifth character type, the productive orientation, is the ideal and represents the ultimate goal in human development. Covering all aspects of human experience, this concept assumes our ability to use all of our capacities and to actualize or realize all of our potentials. Fromm does not define productivity as synonymous with creativity in an exclusively artistic sense. The productive orientation is an attitude that can be attained by every human being. It has as its most important object not the acquisition of material things but the development of our selves.

He believes that this orientation is the ideal condition for mankind, although it does not yet characterize any society. Actually, Fromm feels that it is not yet achieved totally by anyone. The best we can achieve—at least with our present social structure—is a combination of the productive and nonproductive orientations. The influence of the productive orientation can then transform the nonproductive traits. For example, guided by productivity, the aggressiveness of the exploitative type can become initiative, the miserliness of the hoarding type can become sound economy, and so on. Only through social change can the productive orientation become dominant in any culture.

In more recent years, Fromm introduced a pair of new orientations:

necrophilious and biophilious. The *necrophilious* character type is attracted to death—to corpses, decay, feces, and dirt. Such a person seems most alive when he or she is talking about death, burials, or sickness. This person dwells on the past, is enamored of force and power, and is attracted to darkness and to nighttime.

The opposite orientation, the *biophilious* type, is in love with life. He or she fights against death, darkness, and decay. This attitude is congruent with the productive orientation; such a person is concerned with growth and development of self and others.

As with the other orientations, pure forms of either of these traits are rare. Most personalities represent a blending of the two, with one orientation being dominant.

**The Importance of Society**

We have seen, throughout our discussion of Fromm, the prominent role he ascribes to culture in shaping the personality. He also notes that, in order for any kind of society to function well, it is imperative that the personalities or characters of all the people be shaped to satisfy the demands of that society. In other words, individuals must be trained in childhood to behave in ways that will fit the needs of the society. A feudal or fascist society must shape its people to be passive and submissive, for example. Those in a commodity-oriented capitalist society must be shaped to consume—to buy the goods and gadgets the society produces and to replace them with newer ones shortly thereafter.

All societies, throughout history, have frustrated people by placing demands on them that are antithetical to human nature. Fromm feels that any society that does not satisfy people’s basic needs is sick and should be replaced, and he remains optimistic about the possibility of shaping a society that will allow people to fulfill themselves.

Fromm calls this ideal society *humanistic communitarian socialism* and describes it as a world in which love, brotherliness, and solidarity characterize all human relationships, in which the productive orientation is able to develop to its fullest, and in which all feelings of loneliness, insignificance, and alienation disappear. The future of civilization, Fromm pleads, depends on how well and how quickly we can develop such a society.

**Techniques of Inquiry**

Unfortunately, it is difficult to describe the methods Fromm used to develop and support his theories. The psychoanalysts we have discussed so far based their systems on the clinical data they obtained from

their patients, and they were quite clear as to their precise methods of analysis. Relative to these earlier theorists, Fromm has written very little about his techniques of inquiry and therapy, and there seems to be no way of knowing on what data he based the theories. He occasionally refers to “psychoanalytic observations” but does not offer specific analytical findings or case studies. We do know that he uses a form of free association and that he considers dream analysis to be one of the most important therapeutic tools, although he does not describe his use of the techniques in much detail.

On what basis, then, did he develop his theories? For the most part, it seems that the theories are based on generalizations and speculations derived from his interpretations of historical changes and social-cultural forces.

It should be noted, however, that, in 1970, Fromm published a cross-disciplinary in-depth study, “Social Character in a Mexican Village,” designed to test his theory of social character. Over a period of several years, psychologists, anthropologists, physicians, statisticians, and other specialists analyzed a Mexican village in terms of its history, economic and social structure, health, attitudes, and even dreams. The data support the social-character theory.

**Fromm’s Image of Human Nature**

It should be clear by now that Fromm expresses a generally optimistic picture of human nature. Agreeing with Adler and Horney, he does not consider us doomed to conflict and anxiety by immutable biological forces.

It is true that he views us as shaped by social, political, and economic forces at work in the society in which we live. However, we are not infinitely malleable. A person is not simply a puppet reacting to the strings pulled by social forces, or “a blank sheet of paper on which culture can write its text.” Thus, we are neither fixed by instincts nor totally commanded by social forces. On the contrary, we have an inherent nature, a set of psychological qualities by which we can shape our personalities and our societies. And this is where Fromm’s optimism—or at least hope—enters the picture. He believes that we have an innate drive or tendency to grow, develop, and realize our potentialities. This, according to Fromm, is our major task in life—to become what we have the potential to become. The result of this inherent tendency in any individual is the personality. Fromm also believes that we possess an innate striving for justice and truth. Failure to realize all of our potentialities—failure to become productive—results in unhappiness and mental illness.

Fromm continues to believe that humanity can and will reach the...
state of realization of its potential for full and harmonious growth and integration, although he is saddened by our failure thus far. He does not believe that we are inherently either good or evil but rather that we become evil if we fail to develop and grow fully. The only way in which we can be at one with one another and with ourselves is by making full, productive use of our abilities. There is no other way to achieve true harmony.

Neither outcome—goodness or evil, fulfillment or frustration, harmony or chaos—is predetermined, either by society or by human nature. Only the potential for goodness and fulfillment exists; the rest is up to us. And it is Fromm’s optimism that allows him to hope that we will make the right choice and allows him to say, at the age of 70, “Who can give up hope as long as there is life?”

A Final Commentary

Fromm’s approach to personality is wide ranging in its perspectives and propositions. He is not exclusively a psychoanalyst but draws on information from other disciplines—notably, history, sociology, and anthropology. One result of this diversity is that a critic must be well versed in these areas in order to be able to attack Fromm’s total system. Few people can do so; therefore, criticisms have often been directed against only one part or another of his theory. For example, a major criticism, as we have noted, is that there is no strong (or even visible) empirical support for his theory. Fromm does not supply any specific, factual supporting data. The Mexican-village study came considerably after the theory was proposed. One cannot find in his writings any data on which he based his theories (a criticism not unique to Fromm, however).

He has also been criticized for not keeping current with newer developments in psychoanalysis. His major reference has been the works of Freud, with occasional formulations from Jung, Horney, and Sullivan. More recent works—for example, those of the humanistic psychologists, who have reached some conclusions that parallel his own—are not recognized in his publications. Many readers see this as a serious omission.

Those knowledgeable about the history and social conditions of the Middle Ages challenge Fromm’s allegation that humanity had attained security, identity, and belongingness during that period. These critics charge that Fromm has painted a highly idealized picture of that era and omitted the stark calamities that occurred—the religious persecutions, witch hunts, plagues, wars, and other physical and psychological hardships. If anything, they argue, the Middle Ages must have been a time of great insecurity and instability.

Such criticisms notwithstanding, Fromm’s books have been tremendously popular, reaching audiences all over the world. He has deliberately written for the lay audience because he wants to reach the greatest number of people with his message about the kind of society we must develop in order to survive. Thus, his books are highly readable in style, with a bare minimum of technical jargon. This is not to say that the books are not challenging or provocative, but rather that the ideas are presented in highly engaging and interesting form.

Fromm has presented us with a unique interpretation of the interaction between humanity and society. Perhaps more than any other theorist, he has made us aware of the continuing and interrelated impact of social, economic, and psychological factors on human nature. Whether or not his specific interpretations turn out to be valid, he has shown us that a human being is not the exclusive product of a single set of forces but the result of an interplay of forces and events. He has challenged us to think beyond the boundaries of any one discipline and has consistently goaded us to evolve a newer and more humane society, pointing out the consequences of not doing so. Thus, his contribution, whatever its impact, has extended beyond psychoanalysis or psychology to include the broad spectrum of social problems that concern us all.

Suggested Readings