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Erich Fromm: a Socialist Humanist

Erich Seligmann Fromm (March 23, 1900, Frankfurt, Germany – March 18, 1980, Muralto, Switzerland) was a German-born American social psychologist, psychoanalyst, sociologist and humanistic philosopher who explored the interaction between psychology and society. By applying psychoanalytic principles to the remedy of cultural ills, Fromm believed, mankind could develop a psychologically balanced «sane society». He was associated with what became known as the Frankfurt School of critical theory [2; 5].

His father was a business man and, according to Erich, rather moody. His mother was frequently depressed. In other words, like quite a few of the people we've looked at, his childhood wasn't very happy. Like Jung, Erich came from a very religious family, in his case orthodox Jews. Fromm himself later became what he called an atheistic mystic [1]. E.Fromm went on to study sociology at the University of Heidelberg, earning his doctorate in 1922 under the supervision of Alfred Weber.

In 1924, he began studying psychoanalysis at the University of Frankfurt before moving to the Berlin Institute of Psychoanalysis [3; 7].

As his biography suggests, Fromm's theory is a rather unique blend of Freud and Marx. Freud emphasized the unconscious, biological drives, repression, and so on. In other words, Freud postulated that our characters were determined by biology. Marx, on the other hand, saw people as determined by their society, and most especially by their economic systems. E.Fromm added to this mix of two deterministic systems something quite foreign to them: The idea of *freedom*. He allows people to *transcend* the determinisms that Freud and Marx attribute to them. In fact, Fromm makes freedom the central characteristic of human nature [8].

E.Fromm describes three ways in which we *escape from freedom*:

1) **Authoritarianism**. We seek to avoid freedom by fusing ourselves with others, by becoming a part of an authoritarian system like the society of the Middle Ages. There are two ways to approach this. One is to submit to the power of others, becoming passive and compliant. The other is to become an authority yourself, a person who applies structure to others. Either way, you escape your separate identity. E.Fromm referred to the extreme version of authoritarianism as *masochism* and *sadism*, and points out that both feel compelled to play their separate roles, so that even the sadist, with all his apparent power over the masochist, is not free to choose his actions. But milder versions of authoritarianism are everywhere. In many classes, for example, there is an implicit contract between students and professors: Students demand structure, and the professor sticks to his notes. It seems innocuous and even natural, but this way the students avoid taking any responsibility for their learning, and the professor can avoid taking on the real issues of his field.

2) **Destructiveness**. Authoritarians respond to a painful existence by, in a sense, eliminating themselves: If there is no me, how can anything hurt me? But others respond to pain by striking out against the world: If I destroy the world, how can it hurt me? It is this escape from freedom that accounts for much of the indiscriminate nastiness of life – brutality, vandalism, humiliation, crime, terrorism. T.Fromm adds that, if a person's desire to destroy is blocked by circumstances, he or she may redirect it inward. The most obvious kind of self-destructiveness is, of course, suicide. But we can also include many illnesses, drug addiction, alcoholism, even the joys of passive entertainment. He turns Freud's death instinct upside down: Self-destructiveness is frustrated destructiveness, not the other way around.

3) **Automaton conformity**. Authoritarians escape by hiding within an authoritarian hierarchy. But our society emphasizes equality. There is less hierarchy

to hide in (though plenty remains for anyone who wants it, and some who don't). When we need to hide, we hide in our mass culture instead. When I get dressed in the morning, there are so many decisions! But I only need to look at what you are wearing, and my frustrations disappear. The person who uses automaton conformity is like a social chameleon: He takes on the coloring of his surroundings. Since he looks like a million other people, he no longer feels alone. He isn't alone, perhaps, but he's not himself either. The automaton conformist experiences a split between his genuine feelings and the colors he shows the world, very much along the lines of Horney's theory [1].

Erich Fromm, like many others, believed that we have needs that go far beyond the basic, physiological ones that some people, like Freud and many behaviorists, think explain all of our behavior. He calls these *human needs*, in contrast to the more basic *animal needs*. And he suggests that the human needs can be expressed in one simple statement: The human being needs *to find an answer to his existence*. He lists five human needs: **1) Relatedness:** As human beings, we are aware of our separateness from each other, and seek to overcome it. Fromm calls this our need for relatedness, and views it as love in the broadest sense. Love, he says, "is union with somebody, or something, outside oneself, under the condition of retaining the separateness and integrity of one's own self."

2. Creativity Fromm believes that we all desire to overcome, to *transcend*, another fact of our being: Our sense of being passive creatures. We want to be creators. There are many ways to be creative: We give birth, we plant seeds, we make pots, we paint pictures, we write books, we love each other. Creativity is, in fact, an expression of love. Unfortunately, some don't find an avenue for creativity. Frustrated, they attempt to transcend their passivity by becoming *destroyers* instead. Destroying puts me "above" the things – or people – I destroy. It makes me feel powerful. We can hate as well as love. But in the end, it fails to bring us that sense of transcendence we need.

3. Rootedness We also need roots. We need to feel at home in the universe, even though, as human beings, we are somewhat alienated from the natural world. The simplest version is to maintain our ties to our mothers. But to grow up means we have to leave the warmth of our mothers' love. To stay would be what Fromm calls a kind of psychological *incest*. In order to manage in the difficult world of adulthood, we need to find new, broader roots. We need to discover our *brotherhood* (and sisterhood) with humanity.

4. A sense of identity "Man may be defined as the animal that can say 'I.'" (p 62 of *The Sane Society*) Fromm believes that we need to have a sense of identity, of *individuality*, in order to stay sane. This need is so powerful that we are sometimes driven to find it, for example by doing anything for signs of status, or by trying desperately to *conform*. We sometimes will even give up our lives in order to remain a part of our group. But this is only pretend identity, an identity we take from others, instead of one we develop ourselves, and it fails to satisfy our need.

5. A frame of orientation Finally, we need to understand the world and our place in it. Again, our society – and especially the religious aspects of our culture – often attempts to provide us with this understanding. Things like our myths, our

philosophies, and our sciences provide us with structure. Fromm says this is really two needs: First, we need a frame of orientation – almost anything will do. Even a bad one is better than none! And so people are generally quite gullible. We want to believe, sometimes even desperately. If we don't have an explanation handy, we will make one up, via *rationalization* [1].

E. Fromm is an excellent and exciting writer. We can find the basics of his theory in *Escape from Freedom* (1941) and *Man for Himself* (1947). His interesting treatise on love in the modern world is called *The Art of Loving* (1956) [6], *The Sane Society* (1955) is devoted to demonstrating how crazy our world is right now, and how that leads to our psychological difficulties [4]. He has also written "the" book on aggression, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973), which includes his ideas on necrophilia. He has written many other great books, including ones on Christianity (*The Dogma of Christ, and Other Essays on Religion, Psychology and Culture* (1963), Marxism, and Zen Buddhism.

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