

Erich Fromm

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Erich Seligmann Fromm

Erich Seligmann Fromm (March 23, 1900 - March 18, 1980) was a German-American Jewish social psychologist, psychoanalyst, humanistic philosopher, and democratic socialist. He was associated with what became known as the Frankfurt School of critical theory.

Life

Erich Fromm was born on 23 March 1900, at Frankfurt am Main, the only child of Orthodox Jewish parents. He started his academic studies in 1918 at the University of Frankfurt am Main with two semesters of jurisprudence. During the summer semester of 1919, Fromm studied at the University of Heidelberg, where he switched from studying jurisprudence to sociology under Alfred Weber (brother of the better known sociologist Max Weber), the psychiatrist-philosopher Karl Jaspers, and Heinrich Rickert. Fromm received his Ph.D. in sociology from Heidelberg in 1922. During the mid

1920s, he was trained to become a psychoanalyst through Frieda Reichmann's psychoanalytic sanatorium in Heidelberg. He began his own clinical practice in 1927. In 1930, he joined the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research and completed his psychoanalytical training. After the Nazi takeover of power in Germany, Fromm moved to Geneva and then, in 1934, to Columbia University in New York. Karen Horney's long-term relationship with Fromm is the subject of her book *Self Analysis*. They each had a marked influence on the other's thought, with Horney illuminating some aspects of psychoanalysis for Fromm and the latter elucidating sociology for Horney. Their relationship ended in the late 1930s. After leaving Columbia, Fromm helped form the New York branch of the Washington School of Psychiatry in 1943, and in 1946 co-founded the William Alanson White Institute of Psychiatry, Psychoanalysis, and Psychology. He was on the faculty of Bennington College from 1941 to 1949.

When Fromm moved to Mexico City in 1949, he became a professor at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) and established a psychoanalytic section at the medical school there. He taught at UNAM until his retirement, in 1965, and at the Mexican Society of Psychoanalysis (SMP) until 1974. Meanwhile, he taught as a professor of psychology at Michigan State University from 1957 to 1961 and as an adjunct professor of psychology at the graduate division of Arts and Sciences at New York University after 1962. In 1974 he moved from Mexico City to Muralto, Switzerland, and died at his home in 1980, five days before his eightieth birthday. All the while, Fromm maintained his own clinical practice and published a series of books.

Psychological theory

Beginning with his first seminal work of 1941, *Escape from Freedom* (known in Britain as *Fear of Freedom*), Fromm's writings were notable as much for their social and political commentary as for their philosophical and psychological underpinnings. Indeed, *Escape from Freedom* is viewed as one of the founding works of Political psychology. His second important work, *Man for Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*, first published in 1947, continued and enriched the ideas of *Escape from Freedom*. Taken together, these books outlined Fromm's theory of human character, which was a natural outgrowth of Fromm's theory of human nature. Fromm's most popular book was *The Art of Loving*, an international bestseller first published in 1956, which recapitulated and complemented the theoretical principles of human nature found in *Escape from Freedom* and *Man for Himself*--principles which were revisited in many of Fromm's other major works.

Central to Fromm's world view was his interpretation of the Talmud, which he began studying as a young man under Rabbi J. Horowitz and later studied under Rabbi Salman Baruch Rabinkow while working towards his doctorate in sociology at the University of Heidelberg and under Nehemia Nobel and Ludwig Krause while studying in Frankfurt. Fromm's grandfather and two great grandfathers on his father's side were rabbis, and a great uncle on his mother's side was a noted Talmudic scholar. However, Fromm turned away from orthodox Judaism in 1926, towards secular

interpretations of scriptural ideals.

The cornerstone of Fromm's humanistic philosophy is his interpretation of the biblical story of Adam and Eve's exile from the Garden of Eden. Drawing on his knowledge of the Talmud, Fromm pointed out that being able to distinguish between good and evil is generally considered to be a virtue, and that biblical scholars generally consider Adam and Eve to have sinned by disobeying God and eating from the Tree of Knowledge. However, departing from traditional religious orthodoxy, Fromm extolled the virtues of humans taking independent action and using reason to establish moral values rather than adhering to authoritarian moral values.

Beyond a simple condemnation of authoritarian value systems, Fromm used the story of Adam and Eve as an allegorical explanation for human biological evolution and existential angst, asserting that when Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge, they became aware of themselves as being separate from nature while still being part of it. This is why they felt "naked" and "ashamed": they had evolved into human beings, conscious of themselves, their own mortality, and their powerlessness before the forces of nature and society, and no longer united with the universe as they were in their instinctive, pre-human existence as animals. According to Fromm, the awareness of a disunited human existence is a source of guilt and shame, and the solution to this existential dichotomy is found in the development of one's uniquely human powers of love and reason. However, Fromm distinguished his concept of love from unreflective popular notions as well as Freudian paradoxical love (see criticism by Marcuse below).

Fromm considered love to be an interpersonal creative capacity rather than an emotion, and he distinguished this creative capacity from what he considered to be various forms of narcissistic neuroses and sado-masochistic tendencies that are commonly held out as proof of "true love." Indeed, Fromm viewed the experience of "falling in love" as evidence of one's failure to understand the true nature of love, which he believed always had the common elements of care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge. Drawing from his knowledge of the Torah, Fromm pointed to the story of Jonah, who did not wish to save the residents of Nineveh from the consequences of their sin, as demonstrative of his belief that the qualities of care and responsibility are generally absent from most human relationships. Fromm also asserted that few people in modern society had respect for the autonomy of their fellow human beings, much less the objective knowledge of what other people truly wanted and needed.

Fromm believed that freedom was an aspect of human nature that we either embrace or escape. He observed that embracing our freedom of will was healthy, whereas escaping freedom through the use of escape mechanisms was the root of psychological conflicts. Fromm outlined three of the most common escape mechanisms: automaton conformity, authoritarianism, and destructiveness. Automaton conformity is changing one's ideal self to conform to a perception of society's preferred type of personality, losing one's true self in the process. Automaton conformity displaces the

burden of choice from self to society. Authoritarianism is giving control of oneself to another. By submitting one's freedom to someone else, this act removes the freedom of choice almost entirely. Lastly, destructiveness is any process which attempts to eliminate others or the world as a whole, all to escape freedom. Fromm said that "the destruction of the world is the last, almost desperate attempt to save myself from being crushed by it".

The word biophilia was frequently used by Fromm as a description of a productive psychological orientation and "state of being". For example, in an addendum to his book *The Heart of Man: Its Genius For Good and Evil*, Fromm wrote as part of his Humanist Credo:

"I believe that the man choosing progress can find a new unity through the development of all his human forces, which are produced in three orientations. These can be presented separately or together: biophilia, love for humanity and nature, and independence and freedom."

Erich Fromm postulated EIGHT basic needs:

Relatedness - Relationships with others, care, respect, knowledge.

Transcendence - Creativity, developing a loving and interesting life.

Rootedness - Feeling of belonging.

Sense of Identity - Seeing ourselves as a unique person and part of a social group.

Frame of orientation - Understanding the world and our place in it.

Excitation and Stimulation - Actively striving for a goal rather than simply responding.

Unity - A sense of oneness between one person and the "natural and human world outside."

Effectiveness - The need to feel accomplished.

Fromm's thesis of the "escape from freedom" is epitomized in the following passage. The "individualized man" referenced by Fromm is man bereft of the "primary ties" of belonging (i.e. nature, family, etc.), also expressed as "freedom from":

"There is only one possible, productive solution for the relationship of individualized man with the world: his active solidarity with all men and his spontaneous activity, love and work, which unite him again with the world, not by primary ties but as a free and independent individual.... However, if the economic, social and political conditions... do not offer a basis for the realization of individuality in the sense just mentioned, while at the same time people have lost those ties which gave them security, this lag makes freedom an unbearable burden. It then becomes identical with doubt, with a kind of life which lacks meaning and direction. Powerful tendencies arise to escape from this kind of freedom into submission or some kind of relationship to man and the world which promises relief from uncertainty, even if it deprives the individual of his freedom." (Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, pp. 36-7. The point is repeated on pp. 31, 256-7.)

Six orientations

Fromm also spoke of "orientation of character" in his book *Man For Himself*, which describes the ways an individual relates to the world and constitutes his general character, and develops from two specific kinds of relatedness to the world: acquiring and assimilating things ("assimilation"), and reacting to people ("socialization"). Fromm considers these character systems the human substitute for instincts in animals. These orientations describe how a man has developed in regard to how he responds to conflicts in his or her life; he also said that people were never pure in any such orientation. These two factors form five types of malignant character, which he calls Receptive, Exploitative, Hoarding, Necrophilous and Marketing. He also described a positive character, which he called Productive.

Fromm's influence on other notable psychologists

Fromm's four non-productive orientations were subject to validation through a psychometric test, The Person Relatedness Test by Elias H. Porter, Ph.D. in collaboration with Carl Rogers, Ph.D. at the University of Chicago's Counseling Center between 1953 and 1955. Fromm's four non-productive orientations also served as basis for the LIFO test, first published in 1967 by Stuart Atkins, Alan Katcher, Ph.D., and Elias Porter, Ph.D. and the Strength Deployment Inventory, first published in 1971 by Chris H. Porter, Ph.D.

Critique of Freud

Fromm examined the life and work of Sigmund Freud at length. He identified a discrepancy between early and later Freudian theory: namely that prior to World War I, Freud described human drives as a tension between desire and repression, but after the war's conclusion, he framed human drives as a struggle between biologically-universal Life and Death (Eros and Thanatos) instincts. Fromm charged Freud and his followers with never acknowledging the contradictions between the two theories.

He also criticized Freud's dualistic thinking. According to Fromm, Freudian descriptions of human consciousness as struggles between two poles was narrow and limiting. Fromm also condemned him as a misogynist unable to think outside the patriarchal milieu of early 20th century Vienna. However, Fromm expressed a great respect for Freud and his accomplishments, in spite of these criticisms.

Political ideas and activities

Fromm's best known work, *Escape from Freedom*, focuses on the human urge to seek a source of authority and control upon reaching a freedom that was thought to be an individual's true desire. Fromm's critique of the modern political order and capitalist system led him to seek insights from

medieval feudalism. In *Escape from Freedom*, he found favor with the lack of individual freedom, rigid structure, and obligations required on the members of medieval society:

What characterizes medieval in contrast to modern society is its lack of individual freedom...But altogether a person was not free in the modern sense, neither was he alone and isolated. In having a distinct, unchangeable, and unquestionable place in the social world from the moment of birth, man was rooted in a structuralized whole, and thus life had a meaning which left no place, and no need for doubt...There was comparatively little competition. One was born into a certain economic position which guaranteed a livelihood determined by tradition, just as it carried economic obligations to those higher in the social hierarchy.

The culmination of Fromm's social and political philosophy was his book *The Sane Society*, published in 1955, which argued in favor of a humanistic and democratic socialism. Building primarily upon the early works of Karl Marx, Fromm sought to re-emphasise the ideal of freedom, missing from most Soviet Marxism, and more frequently found in the writings of libertarian socialists and liberal theoreticians. Fromm's brand of socialism rejected both Western capitalism and Soviet communism, which he saw as dehumanizing and that resulted in a virtually universal modern phenomenon of alienation. He became one of the founders of socialist humanism, promoting the early writings of Marx and his humanist messages to the US and Western European public.

In the early 1960s, Fromm published two books dealing with Marxist thoughts (*Marx's Concept of Man* and *Beyond the Chains of Illusion: my Encounter with Marx and Freud*). In 1965, working to stimulate the Western and Eastern cooperation between Marxist humanists, Fromm published a series of articles entitled *Socialist Humanism: An International Symposium*. In 1966, the American Humanist Association named him Humanist of the Year.

For a period, Fromm was also active in US politics. He joined the Socialist Party of America in the mid-1950s, and did his best to help them provide an alternative viewpoint to the prevailing McCarthyism of the time. This alternative viewpoint was best expressed in his 1961 paper *May Man Prevail? An Inquiry into the Facts and Fictions of Foreign Policy*. However, as a co-founder of SANE, Fromm's strongest political activism was in the international peace movement, fighting against the nuclear arms race and US involvement in the Vietnam War. After supporting Senator Eugene McCarthy's losing bid for the Democratic presidential nomination, Fromm more or less retreated from the American political scene, although he did write a paper in 1974 entitled *Remarks on the Policy of Détente* for a hearing held by the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.

Criticism

In *Eros and Civilization* Herbert Marcuse condemns Fromm, that in the beginning he was a radical

theorist who later turned to conformity. Marcuse also argued that Fromm, as well as his close colleagues Sullivan and Karen Horney, removed Freud's libido theory and other radical concepts, which thus reduced psychoanalysis to a set of idealist ethics, which only embrace the status quo. Fromm's response, in both *The Sane Society* and in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, argues that Freud indeed deserves substantial credit for recognizing the central importance of the subconscious, but also that he tended to reify his own concepts that depicted the self as the passive outcome of instinct and social control, with very minimal volition or variability. Fromm argues that later scholars such as Marcuse accepted these concepts as dogma, whereas social-psychology requires a more dynamic theoretical and empirical approach.

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