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## My Own Concept of Man

Erich Fromm  
(1977g-eng)

The following paper, written by Fromm in 1969, is the second part of a longer paper entitled "Freud's Model of Man and Its Social Determinants" (cf. 1970d). It was planned to be presented by Fromm at the Third International Forum that in 1969 took place in Mexico City. Because of his health situation Fromm stayed in Europe and was not able to present the paper by himself. Thus one of his pupils read the paper. – The first part of "Freud's Model of Man and Its Social Determinants" Fromm included in his cumulative book *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis* that was published in 1970 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, pp. 42-61). Both parts were published so far only in German under the title "Das psychoanalytische Bild vom Menschen und seine gesellschaftliche Standortbedingtheit" in: G. Chrzanowski et al. (Ed.), *Das Irrationale in der Psychoanalyse. Theoretische und klinische Aspekte* (= Weiterentwicklung der Psychoanalyse und ihrer Anwendungen, Volume 5), Goettingen (Verlag für Medizinische Psychologie) 1977, pp. 17-43. – The second part here entitled "My Own Concept of Man" refers to Fromm's own concept of man and his own psychoanalytic understanding of man. It was first published in: *Fromm Forum* (English Edition – ISBN 1437-1189), 17 / 2013, Tuebingen (Selbstverlag), pp. 5-10.

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In the following I want to give a brief sketch of my own anthropological views as they have been expressed in my work since 1931.

I should like to say first a word about the question why I call the radical humanistic revision of Freud's theory as I have undertaken it "psychoanalysis", and why I do not consider it to be a special "school." The reason is simply that this revision is based upon the findings of Freud, especially with regard to the role of the unconscious, repression, resistance, the significance of childhood experiences, transference, and the dynamic concept of character. If one looks at my views from the standpoint of dogmatic, orthodox analysis as not being psychoanalysis, then I can only say that in my opinion a theory that remains unchanged in all its essential points in the course of 70 years proves paradoxically, by this very rigidity, that it has changed in its deepest core. Aside from this, the question can be decided only from a theoretical point of view, and not by the fiat of the psychoanalytic bureaucracy.

In describing briefly what I consider to be the social determinants of my own views, I can do so only with the reservation that others may be more objective. The most obvious change lies in the fact that my active thinking began after the First World War, while the *belle époque* was only a beautiful and somewhat nostalgic childhood memory.

The last years of the First World War, the revolutionary process since 1917, the hopes of the 20's and the disappointments in the 30's determined decisively my own thinking in the direction of a radical critique of society and ideology. A critique not only of capitalist society, but also of the system of "socialism" which, under the leadership of Stalin



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succeeded in the total falsification of Marxist thought. The philosophical climate of radical humanism, historical materialism, dialectical and process-oriented philosophy have taken the place of mechanistic materialism and biological vitalism.

The decisive philosophical influences are characterized by the names of Heraclitus, Spinoza, Hegel and Marx, and in addition to those were the humanist influence of the Prophets, of Buddhism, Master Eckhart and Goethe.

In contrast to Freud, I do not look on man chemically as *homme machine*, driven by the chemically conditioned mechanism unpleasure-pleasure, but as being *primarily* related to others and in need of them; not, in the first place, for the mutual satisfaction of needs, but for reasons which follow from the nature of man. The nature of man I consider to be not a definable, unchangeable substance which is observable as such, but as an opposition which exists exclusively in the human being: an opposition between being in nature and being subject to all its laws and simultaneously to transcend nature, because man, and only he, is aware of himself, and of his existence, in fact, the only instance in nature where life has become aware of itself.

At the basis of this insoluble existential dichotomy (existential in contrast to historically conditioned opposites which can be made to disappear, like the one between wealth and poverty) lies an evolutionary, biologically given fact: man emerges from animal evolution at the point where determination by instincts has reached a minimum, while at the same time the development of that part of the brain which is the basis for thinking and imagination has developed far beyond the order of size which is found among the primates. This fact makes man on the one hand more helpless than the animal, and gives him on the other the possibility for a new, even though entirely different kind of strength. Man *qua* man has been thrown out of nature, yet is subject to it; he is a freak of nature, as it were. This objective, biological fact of man's inherent dichotomy requires new solutions, that is to say, human development. Subjectively, the awareness of having been torn away from his natural basis and of being an isolated and unrelated fragment in a chaotic world, would lead to insanity (the insane person is one who has lost his place in a structured world, one which he shares with others and in which he can orient himself.) All the energies of man have the aim to transform the unbearable dichotomy into a bearable one, and to create ever new and, as far as possible, better solutions for this dichotomy. Needless to say that aside from this man, like the animal, is also driven to satisfy his physiological needs, which he shares with the animal.

Whatever the solutions for this dichotomy are, they must fulfill certain conditions. Man must be affectively related to others in order to overcome the anxiety produced by his total isolation; he must have a frame of orientation, a picture of the world that permits him to orient himself in the world and to find his place in it as an acting subject; he must adopt certain norms that make it possible for him to make relatively consistent decisions without much hesitation. As far as the contents of his relatedness, of his frame of orientation, and of his norms are concerned, they are important, but nevertheless only of secondary importance from the standpoint of his mental survival.

As to the question of the "nature" or the "science" of man, this theory proposes that this science (that by Freud according to which man is man) consists in nothing but the opposition which produces dialectically different solutions; it does not mean that the science of man is identical with any of these solutions. To be sure, the number and quality



of its solutions is no arbitrary and unlimited but determined by the qualities of the human organism and its environment. The data of history, child psychology, psychopathology, as well as the history of art, religion and of myths, make it possible to formulate certain hypotheses about the number and kind of such possible solutions.

As to the nature of human motivation, certain important differences exist between the revised model and Freud's. Freud assumed that physiology is a source of human drives. This is character, inasmuch as we deal with the level of human self preservation and to a certain degree also of sexuality, but the most important part of human passions have a different aim, that of the realization of human faculties and potentialities.<sup>1</sup> Human potentialities strive passionately to express themselves in those objects in the world to which they correspond and thus they unite and relate man with the world and free man from his isolation. To put it another way: man is not determined only by a lack of tension (unpleasure) as Freud believed; he is not less strongly motivated to express himself in ways which have no purpose of practical use. In myth, art, religion, play, we see significant examples of this human need from the beginning of man's history. The interest in all that which transcends the person and man's survival which requires stimulation and, in turn, is stimulated is an elementary human need.

From this socio-biological view-point of man follow consequences for the source of human energy. While in the Freudian system the source of energy is the inner chemistry which gives tension, it only aims at reduction of tension. In the model proposed here the source of energy lies in the total organism and is mobilized by the organism's passionate attempt for union with the world and for the transcending of mere self-preservation and self-purposefulness. There is no reason to differentiate between various kinds of energy in the organism.

Man, then, has two vital needs: one, as far as his physiological constitution is concerned, that of physical survival, and one as far as his mental survival is concerned, sanity. The second need is specifically human, and not less important than the first – in fact, sometimes more important.

In this period of nuclear threat one is prone to wish that the drive for physical survival may have a stronger effect than seems to be the case in reality. The vast majority of people play with the possibility of collective suicide because certain psychic needs like the desire for power, property, honor, etc., are stronger than the need to survive. We may assume that the total energy produced by the organism is used by man for both aims, that of physical and mental survival. Hence the various solutions for the existential dichotomy are just as charged with energy as the ego drives or the libido. For this reason it follows that there is no reason to separate various kinds of energy or to speak of desexualized energy as it is suggested by the ego psychologists.

Many aims which man passionately pursues are rationalized by modern man as motivated by rational and purposeful considerations, while they are in reality psychological aims which in other social structures have been conceived of as religious, in a broad sense of the word. Modern man is fond of believing that primitive man rationalized practical purposes as religious ones; he does not see that he tends to rationalize religious needs as practical and utilitarian ones. By "religious" I am not using the word in

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<sup>1</sup> This idea was expressed clearly by Marx, then again Kurt Goldstein gave it a central place in his scientific thought and Abram Maslow and a number of other psychiatrists have followed him in this respect.



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the conventional sense, but in reference to the collective, passionate needs which aim at the regulation of the affective relatedness of man to the world, and to the solution of his existential human problem.

The dialectic-humanist revision deviates from Freud's model still in other aspects, of which I want to mention here only some of the most important ones. First of all, in the concept of the unconscious. In the revised model the unconscious is not conceived as a *place* with a certain content, but as a *function*. There is no such thing as the unconscious. There is only the function of "being aware" of the reality which exists inside or outside of man. From this it follows that there is no special content of the unconscious. We can repress the awareness of inner or outer reality; that which is repressed can be archaic, irrational and evil but it can also be wiser, more rational and better than that which exists in our consciousness.

The admission of certain contents of experience to consciousness is in the first place socially conditioned and only marginally by individual childhood experiences. This is so because an experience is admitted to consciousness only if it can pass through the social filter. This filter consists of language, logic and the "thinkable" and "unthinkable" contents as they are characteristic for every society. What is conscious in one society remains unconscious in another. Only the fully developed society which is not in need of any system for suppression and manipulation can leave man free to be aware of all reality, since such a society has nothing to protect that needs to be repressed.<sup>2</sup> Within every society the size and intensity of repression varies with the degree of the development for independence and active productivity which it can permit its members.

The moral problem of man is seen differently in this revised concept from what it is in Freud's system. While, as indicated above, Freud's theory of the Super-Ego is mainly correct inasmuch as it is a critical theory of the conscience of most men today and in past history, it nevertheless is not entirely correct. Aside from the "authoritarian conscience" man has still another one: the "humanist conscience": A voice which in terms of goals and norms calls him back to himself in the name of his optimal and at the same time real possibilities.

While this voice is often drowned by the voice of the authoritarian conscience, that is to say, while the humanistic conscience is often unconscious, the fact is that it exists, and that its existence can be inferred from many observable phenomena, like feelings of guilt, loss of energy, or dreams, nevertheless many times the voice of humanistic conscience is also conscious. The content of this humanistic conscience is essentially identical with the norms as they are common to all great humanist religious and ethical systems. It has to be noted, however, that the conscious recognition of these traditional norms does not prove in any way that they have not become the contents of an authori-

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<sup>2</sup> I should like to add a remark which refers to the view-point which has been emphasized by Herbert Marcuse. He believes that among other things the liberation of the sadistic and coprophilic perversions is a necessary condition for the full experience of happiness of the free man in the "non-repressive" society. He does not see the clinical fact for which there is ample evidence, that these perversions themselves are the product of pathological social and individual constellations which are based on force and lack of freedom. The problem is not, as he thinks, that these anal-sadistic strivings should not be *repressed* in a non-repressive society, but that they do not *develop* in such a society. As one example I want to point to the fact that the "social character" of the German lower middle class, the core supporters of Hitler, had exactly the character orientation which was described by Freud as anal-sadistic. (I have written in *Escape from Freedom* about the reasons for this connection.)



tarian conscience, and hence have been falsified in their real meaning.

Psychoanalytic theory permits going one step further. In order to demonstrate this, we must return once more to Freud's theory in order to extract from it a thought it contains only implicitly. Freud assumed that character is determined by the various libidinous levels of development. He postulated the development from primary narcissism, that is, total unrelatedness, to oral-receptive, oral-sadistic, and anal-sadistic up to the genital level, which in principle is reached around puberty. He assumed that the fully developed mature person leaves the pre-genital levels essentially behind him and his character is determined mainly by the genital libido. This scheme is first of all an evolutionary scheme of the libido, and of the resulting relatedness to the world, which has no obvious reference to values.

Nevertheless, it is not difficult to recognize that implicitly it represents a scheme of values. The adult mature person, the "genital character" in Freud's sense, is capable of "love and work", while the pre-genital character is one which has not fully developed and is in this sense crippled. The clinical data of psychoanalysis makes this much clearer than the theory. The oral receptive person is a dependent, and the oral sadistic, an exploitative character. The anal sadistic character is that belonging to a person who enjoys the submission and suffering of others, and who is at the same time an avaricious, hoarding person. Only the genital character has reached full independence. He respects, and as Freud sometimes says, loves the other person. Precisely because the pre-genital fixations are an expression of unsolved libido problems, they tend to foster the development of the neurotic character.

What matters here is the fact that in Freud's scheme (as also in many others) there is a hidden scale of values to be found. The genital character is more highly developed than the pre-genital. He is desirable and represents the goal, and hence the norm for the development of character. For Freud, therefore, the anal-sadistic character, for instance, is not a value-neutral variation but the result of a failure in the normal process of development. Seen in this light we find that the hidden value scale in Freud's scheme of the libido and character is not too different from the humanistic scale of values: independence, respect for others, and love are better than dependence, avarice, and sadism.

Freud's theory that one can separate sexuality and character remains correct, regardless of the problem whether sexuality determines character or character sexual behavior. For this reason the Freudian system does not permit looking at pre-genital sexuality and the perversions rooted in it as so many forms of sexual satisfaction which are not different among themselves in terms of value. Inasmuch as they are regressive in terms of libido development, they are also regressive in terms of character development, and hence negative. Why this holds true especially for the anal sadistic libido and the anal character cannot be demonstrated within the limits of this paper.

The scale of values which I have discussed here as being implicit and hidden in Freud's scheme of the development of the libido and of character is made explicit in the revised model of man's nature. This revision was made easier by clinical observations which have suggested that instead of the libido and the stimuli mediated by the erogenous zones being the roots of character, they are the total mode of relatedness to the world and to oneself. Man is compelled to put his own system of relatedness ("system



of socialization") in the place of instinctive determination, and to develop his own system of acquisition and use ("system of assimilation"), again as a substitute for the instinctively determined mode of acquisition. The various systems are necessary for the satisfaction of his vital interests, and hence they are charged with energy.

There are basically two possibilities for the system of socialization and assimilation. The "unproductive" orientation in the sphere of assimilation in which all that is desired is not obtained by human activity but by receiving, exploiting, or avaricious hoarding; in the sphere of relatedness, dependence, sadistic control, or destructiveness are the manifestations of the unproductive orientation. Briefly, greed and inner passivity, as used by Aristotle and Spinoza, characterize unproductiveness. The productive orientation, on the other hand, is based on generating activity which means in the sphere of acquisition, of work, and in the sphere of relatedness of love, respect and independence. In other terms the unproductive mode of orientation is that of *having* (and using), the productive that of *being*.

One can still establish conditions of value between various character orientations in an entirely different sense, namely in terms of the *optimal functioning* of the character system. It can be said with regard to any system that it functions optimally when all its parts are integrated in such a way that each part can function optimally, and that conflicts within the system and between the system and other unavoidable systems find fruitful solutions instead of energy-wasting ones. It can be shown in detail that the productive system of character is also that which functions optimally from an energy standpoint. To give only one example: the dependent person in an unproductive system can satisfy his needs for closeness and intimacy, but he loses in independence and freedom. In the productive system, on the other hand, we find a synthesis between love and intimacy on the one hand, and independence and integrity on the other (provided we understand by love the effective union of two persons under the conditions of their mutual independence and their integrity). In this general sense the system of productive orientation is superior to the unproductive one in terms of values. The productive system permits the development of the optimal intensity of life and for the capacity of joy. The unproductive system wastes and destroys a great deal of human energy.

One important point must be emphasized here. The theory of character as I have presented it does not refer to the isolated individual, but to man in the only form in which he can exist, namely as a social being. Saying this I do not refer to "a" or "the" society, in which man lives; these terms are empty abstractions. Man lives in a specific social system, characterized by its specific productive forces, mode of production, class relations, etc. – briefly, society in the sense in which Marx conceived it for the first time in full clarity. Individual variants of character determined by personal circumstances and by constitution are essentially variants of the "social character."

In saying this I am introducing a new concept into the presentation of the model of man, that of the "social character." The social character is the nucleus of character traits common to most members of a society or a class. We start from the premise that man, living in a specific social system needs to develop a character structure which corresponds to this system. First of all one has to consider the fact that every society has an immanent tendency to continue its own structure; not only because the interests of those classes ruling in a society require this, but also because the system of a functioning society corresponds to a considerable degree to the given socio-economic



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needs and possibilities (when these change an antagonism arises between the social character and the new social factors which in the historical process has often been resolved in a productive synthesis, but also often by catastrophic upheavals).

In order to function, each society needs not only material productive forces, but also the energies contained in the productive force = man. These energies, however, can not be used in their general form, but only in specific forms, namely in character traits which make man desire to do what he has to do in his social function: to serve, to rule, to cooperate, to make war, to consume, to work, etc. The social character affects the transformation of general human energy into socially useful energy. People who believe that the social character is "natural," accept also the system of ideologies and thought systems corresponding to it. These reinforce at the same time the social character because they make it appear as being desirable and "good." The social system rewards in many ways those whose individual character is closest to the social character. The social character has the important function for all individuals of making attractive, or at least tolerable, what is socially necessary, and to create the basis for consistent behavior because the social character becomes "second nature," substituting for the lost instincts.

To sum up, the social character serves first the function of society by the transformation of human energy from its general into a socially useful form; second, the adaptation of the individual to society, and third, as a mediator between the socio-economic structure and ideology. (In the sense of Marx, between the "economic base" and the "ideological superstructure").

Concluding these remarks it might be indicated to raise the question whether the revision of Freud's concept of man as it was sketched in these pages is optimistic, in contrast to Freud's picture. The revised concept presented here is certainly not optimistic in the sense of faith in the progress of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. But it is also not tragic in Freud's sense, who believed that capitalist society is the un-improvable, optimum of all social possibilities, and who, because of this, often looked at ahistorical dichotomies as if they were existential ones.

As I have indicated, I believe that the existential dichotomies cannot be abolished, and remain the motivating power of human development, although in their dialectic development these conflicts result in ever higher and more human solutions. Man does not become a super man nor does human society become a paradise. But the dialectic process can humanize the contradiction, and society can liberate itself from the influence of irrational and unnecessary social pathology to such a degree that one can rightly speak, with Marx, of all previous history as being the pre-history of mankind.

Related to this is another problem. While this picture of man assumes the basis that human existence is based on a definite empirical, observable dichotomy, this does not imply that one can predict a definite and certain goal of this development. Man driven on by immanent contradictions further and further, remains an open system. The higher his development individually and socially, the greater his vulnerability and with that also the possibility of total destruction. His progress remains always only one side of an alternative, the other side of which is barbarism, or psychic or physical self-destruction.

All our knowledge of man is based on our previous experience with man, and hence incomplete and questionable. What other unforeseen possibilities exist within man we



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cannot know. The "human possibility" is unknown, and can manifest itself only in the historical process. That is why man, in the last analysis, is indefinable and indescribable; the total person is unknowable, partly because the hidden possibilities may already exist in him, but partly because he can not be fully studied inasmuch as he is a living process. If in the course of history, theology becomes transformed into anthropology, one important aspect of God, as it has been emphasized particularly in "negative theology" remains valid also for anthropology: man is unknowable and nameless. This holds true for the alive man in the same sense as theology has formulated it for the "living God."