



## Productiveness and Productive Orientation

Erich Fromm  
2003z-e

Selected from his writings by Rainer Funk. First published in: *Fromm Forum* (English edition), No. 7 (2003), Tuebingen (Selbstverlag), pp. 5-16.

Copyright © 2004 and 2011 by The Literary Estate of Erich Fromm, c/o Dr. Rainer Funk, Urs-rainer Ring 24, D-72076 Tuebingen / Germany. – Fax: +49-(0)7071-600049; E-Mail: fromm-estate[at-symbol]fromm-online.com.

### 1. What is not meant by productiveness

In order to avoid the misunderstandings to which the term „productiveness“ lends itself, it seems appropriate to discuss briefly what is not meant by productiveness.

Generally the word „productiveness“ is associated with creativeness, particularly artistic creativeness. The real artist, indeed, is the most convincing representative of productiveness. But not all artists are productive; a conventional tainting, e.g., may exhibit nothing more than the technical skill to reproduce the likeness of a person in photographic fashion on a canvas. But a person can experience, see, feel, and think productively without having the gift to create something visible or communicable. *Productiveness is an attitude which every human being is capable of, unless he is mentally and emotionally crippled.*

The term „productive“ is also apt to be confused with „active,“ and „productiveness“ with „activity.“ While the two terms can be synonymous (for instance, in Aristotle’s concept of activity), activity in modern usage frequently indicates the very opposite of productiveness. Activity is usually defined as behavior which brings about a change in an existing situation by an expenditure of energy. In contrast, a person is described as passive if he is unable to change or overtly influence an existing situation and is influenced or moved by forces outside himself. This current concept of activity takes into account only the actual expenditure of energy and the change brought about by it. It does not distinguish between the underlying psychic conditions governing the activities.

An example, though an extreme one, of nonproductive activity is the activity of a person under hypnosis. The person in a deep hypnotic trance may have his eyes open, may walk, talk, and do things; he „acts.“ The general definition of activity would apply to him, since energy is spent and some change brought about. But if we consider the particular character and quality of this activity, we find that it is not really the hypnotized person who is the actor, but the hypnotist who, by means of his suggestions, acts through him. While the hypnotic trance is an artificial state, it is an extreme but characteristic example of a situation in which a person can be active and yet not be the true actor, his activity resulting from compelling forces over which he has no control.



A common type of nonproductive activity is the reaction to anxiety, whether acute or chronic, conscious or unconscious, which is frequently at the root of the frantic pre-occupations of men today. Different from anxiety motivated activity, though often blended with it, is the type of activity based on submission to or dependence on an authority. The authority may be feared, admired, or „loved“ – usually all three are mixed – but the cause of the activity is the command of the authority, both in a formal way and with regard to its contents. The person is active because the authority wants him to be, and he does what the authority wants him to do. This kind of activity is found in the authoritarian character. To him activity means to act in the name of something higher than his own self. He can act in the name of God, the past, or duty, but not in the name of himself. The authoritarian character receives the impulse to act from a superior power which is neither assailable nor changeable, and is consequently unable to heed spontaneous impulses from within himself.

Resembling submissive activity is automaton activity. Here we do not find dependence on overt authority, but rather on anonymous authority as it is represented by public opinion, culture patterns, common sense, or „science.“ The person feels or does what he is supposed to feel or do; his activity lacks spontaneity in the sense that it does not originate from his own mental or emotional experience but from an outside source.

Among the most powerful sources of activity are irrational passions. The person who is driven by stinginess, masochism, envy, jealousy, and all other forms of greed is compelled to act; yet his actions are neither free nor rational but in opposition to reason and to his interests as a human being. A person so obsessed repeats himself, becoming more and more inflexible, more and more stereotyped. He is active, but he is not productive.

Although the source of these activities is irrational and the acting persons are neither free nor rational, there can be important practical results, often leading to material success. In the concept of productiveness we are not concerned with activity necessarily leading to practical results but with an attitude, with a mode of reaction and orientation toward the world and oneself in the process of living. We are concerned with *man's character, not with his success.*

E. Fromm, *Man for Himself* (1947a), pp. 85-87.

## 2. Productiveness as being spontaneous related

The social history of man started with his emerging from a state of oneness with the natural world to an awareness of himself as an entity separate from surrounding nature and men. Yet this awareness remained very dim over long periods of history. The individual continued to be closely tied to the natural and social world from which he emerged; while being partly aware of himself as a separate entity, he felt also part of the world around him. The growing process of the emergence of the individual from his original ties, a process which we may call „individuation,“ seems to have reached its peak in modern history in the centuries between the Reformation and the present.

In the life history of an individual we find the same process. A child is born when it is no longer one with its mother and becomes a biological entity separate from her. Yet,



while this biological separation is the beginning of individual human existence, the child remains functionally one with its mother for a considerable period.

To the degree to which the individual, figuratively speaking, has not yet completely severed the umbilical cord which fastens him to the outside world, he lacks freedom; but these ties give him security and a feeling of belonging and of being rooted somewhere. I wish to call these ties that exist before the process of individuation has resulted in the complete emergence of an individual „primary ties.“ They are organic in the sense that they are a part of normal human development; they imply a lack of individuality, but they also give security and orientation to the individual. They are the ties that connect the child with its mother, the member of a primitive community with his clan and nature, or the medieval man with the Church and his social caste. Once the stage of complete individuation is reached and the individual is free from these primary ties, he is confronted with a new task: to orient and root himself in the world and to find security in other ways than those which were characteristic of his pre-individualistic existence. Freedom then has a different meaning from the one it had before this stage of evolution is reached. [...]

The more the child grows and to the extent to which primary ties are cut off, the more it develops a quest for freedom and independence. But the fate of this quest can only be fully understood if we realize the dialectic quality in this process of growing individuation.

This process has two aspects: one is that the child grows stronger physically, emotionally, and mentally. In each of these spheres intensity and activity grow. At the same time, these spheres become more and more integrated. An organized structure guided by the individual's will and reason develops. If we call this organized and integrated whole of the personality the self, we can also say that the *one side of the growing process of individuation is the growth of self-strength*. The limits of the growth of individuation and the self are set, partly by individual conditions, but essentially by social conditions. For although the differences between individuals in this respect appear to be great, every society is characterized by a certain level of individuation beyond which the normal individual cannot go.

The other aspect of the process of individuation is growing aloneness. The primary ties offer security and basic unity with the world outside of oneself. To the extent to which the child emerges from that world it becomes aware of being alone, of being an entity separate from all others. This separation from a world, which in comparison with one's own individual existence is overwhelmingly strong and powerful, and often threatening and dangerous, creates a feeling of powerlessness and anxiety. As long as one was an integral part of that world, unaware of the possibilities and responsibilities of individual action, one did not need to be afraid of it. When one has become an individual, one stands alone and faces the world in all its perilous and overpowering aspects.

Impulses arise to give up one's individuality, to overcome the feeling of aloneness and powerlessness by completely submerging oneself in the world outside. These impulses, however, and the new ties arising from them, are not identical with the primary ties which have been cut off in the process of growth itself. Just as a child can never return to the mother's womb physically, so it can never reverse, psychologically, the process of



individuation. Attempts to do so necessarily assume the character of submission, in which the basic contradiction between the authority and the child who submits to it is never eliminated. Consciously the child may feel secure and satisfied, but unconsciously it realizes that the price it pays is giving up strength and the integrity of its self. Thus the result of submission is the very opposite of what it was to be: submission increases the child's insecurity and at the same time creates hostility and rebelliousness, which is the more frightening since it is directed against the very persons on whom the child has remained – or become – dependent.

However, submission is not the only way of avoiding aloneness and anxiety. The other way, the only one which is productive and does not end in an insoluble conflict, is that of spontaneous relationship to man and nature, a relationship that connects the individual with the world without eliminating his individuality. This kind of relationship – the foremost expressions of which are love and productive work – are rooted in the integration and strength of the total personality and are therefore subject to the very limits that exist for the growth of the self.

E. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (1941a), pp. 24-30.

### 3. Productiveness as spontaneous activity

Does freedom from all primary ties make the individual so alone and isolated that inevitably he must escape into new bondage? Are *independence* and freedom identical with *isolation* and fear? Or is there a state of positive freedom in which the individual exists as an independent self and yet is not isolated but united with the world, with other men, and nature?

We believe that there is a positive answer, that the process of growing freedom does not constitute a vicious circle, and that man can be free and yet not alone, critical and yet not filled with doubts, independent and yet an integral part of mankind. This freedom man can attain by the realization of his self, by being himself. What is realization of the self? Idealistic philosophers have believed that self-realization can be achieved by intellectual insight alone. They have insisted upon splitting human personality, so that man's nature may be suppressed and guarded by his reason. The result of this split, however, has been that not only the emotional life of man but also his intellectual faculties have been crippled. Reason, by becoming a guard set to watch its prisoner, nature, has become a prisoner itself; and thus both sides of human personality, reason and emotion, were crippled. We believe that the realization of the self is accomplished not only by an act of thinking but also by the realization of man's total personality, by the active expression of his emotional and intellectual potentialities. These potentialities are present in everybody; they become real only to the extent to which they are expressed. In other words, positive *freedom consists in the spontaneous activity of the total, integrated personality.*

We approach here one of the most difficult problems of psychology: the problem of spontaneity. An attempt to discuss this problem adequately would require another volume. However, on the basis of what we have said so far, it is possible to arrive at an understanding of the essential quality of spontaneous activity by means of contrast.



Spontaneous activity is not compulsive activity, to which the individual is driven by his isolation and powerlessness; it is not the activity of the automaton, which is the uncritical adoption of patterns suggested from the outside. Spontaneous activity is free activity of the self and implies, psychologically, what the Latin root of the word, *sponte*, means literally: of one's free will. By activity we do not mean „doing something,“ but the quality of creative activity that can operate in one's emotional, intellectual, and sensuous experiences and in one's will as well. One premise for this spontaneity is the acceptance of the total personality and the elimination of the split between „reason“ and „nature“; for only if man does not repress essential parts of his self, only if he has become transparent to himself, and only if the different spheres of life have reached a fundamental integration, is spontaneous activity possible.

While spontaneity is a relatively rare phenomenon in our culture, we are not entirely devoid of it. In order to help in the understanding of this point, I should like to remind the reader of some instances where we all catch a glimpse of spontaneity.

In the first place, we know of individuals who are – or have been – spontaneous, whose thinking, feeling, and acting were the expression of their selves and not of an automaton. These individuals are mostly known to us as artists. As a matter of fact, the artist can be defined as an individual who can express himself spontaneously. If this were the definition of an artist – Balzac defined him just in that way – then certain philosophers and scientists have to be called artists too, while others are as different from them as an old-fashioned photographer from a creative painter. There are other individuals who, though lacking the ability – or perhaps merely the training – for expressing themselves in an objective medium as the artist does, possess the same spontaneity. The position of the artist is vulnerable, though, for it is really only the successful artist whose individuality or spontaneity is respected; if he does not succeed in selling the art, he remains to his contemporaries a crank, a „neurotic.“ The artist in this matter is in a similar position to that of the revolutionary throughout history. The successful revolutionary is a statesman, the unsuccessful one a criminal.

Small children offer another instance of spontaneity. They have an ability to feel and think that which is really *theirs*; this spontaneity shows in what they say and think, in the feelings that are expressed in their faces. If one asks what makes for the attraction small children have for most people I believe that, aside from sentimental and conventional reasons, the answer must be that it is this very quality of spontaneity. It appeals profoundly to everyone who is not so dead himself that he has lost the ability to perceive it. As a matter of fact, there is nothing more attractive and convincing than spontaneity whether it is to be found in a child, in an artist, or in those individuals who cannot thus be grouped according to age or profession.

Most of us can observe at least moments of our own spontaneity which are at the same time moments of genuine happiness. Whether it be the fresh and spontaneous perception of a landscape, or the dawning of some truth as the result of our thinking, or a sensuous pleasure that is not stereotyped, or the welling up of love for another person – in these moments we all know what a spontaneous act is and may have some vision of what human life could be if these experiences were not such rare and uncultivated occurrences.

Why is spontaneous activity the answer to the problem of freedom? We have said



that negative freedom by itself makes the individual an isolated being, whose relationship to the world is distant and distrustful and whose self is weak and constantly threatened. Spontaneous activity is the one way in which man can overcome the terror of aloneness without sacrificing the integrity of his self; for in the spontaneous realization of the self man unites himself anew with the world – with man, nature, and himself. Love is the foremost component of such spontaneity; not love as the dissolution of the self in another person, not love as the possession of another person, but love as spontaneous affirmation of others, as the union of the individual with others on the basis of the preservation of the individual self. The dynamic quality of love lies in this very polarity: that it springs from the need of overcoming separateness, that it leads to oneness – and yet that individuality is not eliminated. Work is the other component; not work as a compulsive activity in order to escape aloneness, not work as a relationship to nature which is partly one of dominating her, partly one of worship of and enslavement by the very products of man's hands, but work as creation in which man becomes one with nature in the act of creation. What holds true of love and work holds true of all spontaneous action, whether it be the realization of sensuous pleasure or participation in the political life of the community. It affirms the individuality of the self and at the same time it unites the self with man and nature. The basic dichotomy that is inherent in freedom – the birth of individuality and the pain of aloneness – is dissolved on a higher plane by man's spontaneous action.

In all spontaneous activity the individual embraces the world. Not only does his individual self remain intact; it becomes stronger and more solidified. *For the self is as strong as it is active.* There is no genuine strength in possession as such, neither of material property nor of mental qualities like emotions or thoughts. There is also no strength in use and manipulation of objects; what we use is not ours simply because we use it. Ours is only that to which we are genuinely related by our creative activity, be it a person or an inanimate object. Only those qualities that result from our spontaneous activity give strength to the self and thereby form the basis of its integrity. The inability to act spontaneously, to express what one genuinely feels and thinks, and the resulting necessity to present a pseudo self to others and oneself, are the root of the feeling of inferiority and weakness. Whether or not we are aware of it, there is nothing of which we are more ashamed than of not being ourselves, and there is nothing that gives us greater pride and happiness than to think, to feel, and to say what is ours.

This implies that what matters is the activity as such, the process and not the result. In our culture the emphasis is just the reverse. We produce not for a concrete satisfaction but for the abstract purpose of selling our commodity; we feel that we can acquire everything material or immaterial by buying it, and thus things become ours independently of any creative effort of our own in relation to them. In the same way we regard our personal qualities and the result of our efforts as commodities that can be sold for money, prestige, and power. The emphasis thus shifts from the present satisfaction of creative activity to the value of the finished product. Thereby man misses the only satisfaction that can give him real happiness – the experience of the activity of the present moment – and chases after a phantom that leaves him disappointed as soon as he believes he has caught it – the illusory happiness called success.

If the individual realizes his self by spontaneous activity and thus relates himself to



the world, he ceases to be an isolated atom; he and the world become part of one structuralized whole; he has his rightful place, and thereby his doubt concerning himself and the meaning of life disappears. This doubt sprang from his separateness and from the thwarting of life; when he can live, neither compulsively nor automatically but spontaneously, the doubt disappears. He is aware of himself as an active and creative individual and recognizes that *there is only one meaning of life: the act of living itself.*

E. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (1941a), pp. 256-261.

#### 4. Productiveness as practicing one's own powers

In discussing the *productive character* I [...] inquire into the nature of the fully developed character that is the aim of human development and simultaneously the ideal of humanistic ethics. [...] Man is not only a rational and social animal. He can also be defined as a producing animal, capable of transforming the materials which he finds at hand, using his reason and imagination. Not only can he produce, he must produce in order to live. Material production, however, is but the most frequent symbol for productiveness as an aspect of character. The „productive orientation“<sup>1</sup> of personality refers to a fundamental attitude, a mode of relatedness in all realms of human experience. It covers mental, emotional, and sensory responses to others, to oneself, and to things. Productiveness is man's ability to use his powers and to realize the potentialities inherent in him. If we say he must use his powers we imply that he must be free and not dependent on someone who controls his powers. We imply, furthermore, that he is guided by reason, since he can make use of his powers only if he knows what they are, how to use them, and what to use them for. Productiveness means that he experiences himself as the embodiment of his powers and as the „actor“; that he feels himself one with his powers and at the same time that they are not masked and alienated from him. [...]

Productiveness is man's realization of the potentialities characteristic of him, the use of his powers. But what is „power“? It is rather ironical that this word denotes two contradictory concepts: *power of* = capacity and *power over* = domination. This contradiction, however, is of a particular kind. Power = domination results from the paralysis of power = capacity. „*Power over*“ is the perversion of „*power to*.“ The ability of man to make productive use of his powers is his potency; the inability is his impotence. With his power of reason he can penetrate the surface of phenomena and understand their essence. With his power of love he can break through the wall which separates one person from another. With his power of imagination he can visualize things not yet existing; he can plan and thus begin to create. Where potency is lacking, man's relatedness to the world is perverted into a desire to dominate, to exert power over others as though they were things. Domination is coupled with death, potency with life. Domination springs from impotence and in turn reinforces it, for if an individual can force somebody else to serve him, his own need to be productive is increasingly paralyzed. [...]

The question arises whether there is anything which the productive person produces and if so, what? While it is true that man's productiveness can create material things,

---

<sup>1</sup> Productiveness as used in this book is meant as an expansion of the concept of spontaneity described in *Escape from Freedom*.



works of art, and systems of thought, *by far the most important object of productiveness is man himself.*

Birth is only one particular step in a continuum which begins with conception and ends with death. All that is between these two poles is a process of giving birth to one's potentialities, of bringing to life all that is potentially given in the two cells. But while physical growth proceeds by itself, if only the proper conditions are given, the process of birth on the mental plane, in contrast, does not occur automatically. It requires productive activity to give life to the emotional and intellectual potentialities of man, to give birth to his self. It is part of the tragedy of the human situation that the development of the self is never completed; even under the best conditions only part of man's potentialities is realized. Man always dies before he is fully born.

E. Fromm, *Man for Himself* (1947a), pp. 85-91 passim.

## 5. Productiveness is the ability to perceive reality reproductively as well as generatively

How is man related to the world when he uses his powers productively?

The world outside oneself can be experienced in two ways: *reproductively* by perceiving actuality in the same fashion as a film makes a literal record of things photographed (although even mere reproductive perception requires the active participation of the mind); and *generatively* by conceiving it, by enlivening and re-creating this new material through the spontaneous activity of one's own mental and emotional powers. While to a certain extent everyone does react in both ways, the respective weight of each kind of experience differs widely. Sometimes either one of the two is atrophied, and the study of these extreme cases in which the reproductive or the generative mode is almost absent offers the best approach to the understanding of each of these phenomena.

The relative atrophy of the generative capacity is very frequent in our culture. A person may be able to recognize things as they are (or as his culture maintains them to be), but he is unable to enliven his perception from within. Such a person is the perfect „realist,“ who sees all there is to be seen of the surface features of phenomena but who is quite incapable of penetrating below the surface to the essential, and of visualizing what is not yet apparent. He sees the details but not the whole, the trees but not the forest. Reality to him is only the sum total of what has already materialized. This person is not lacking in imagination, but his is a calculating imagination, combining factors all of which are known and in existence, and inferring their future operation.

On the other hand, the person who has lost the capacity to perceive actuality is insane. The psychotic person builds up an inner world of reality in which he seems to have full confidence; he lives in his own world, and the common factors of reality as perceived by all men are unreal to him. When a person sees objects which do not exist in reality but are entirely the product of his imagination, he has hallucinations; he interprets events in terms of his own feelings, without reference to, or at least without proper acknowledgment of, what goes on in reality. A paranoid person may believe that he is being persecuted, and a chance remark may indicate a plan to humiliate and ruin him. He is convinced that the lack of any more obvious and explicit manifestation



of such intention does not prove anything; that, although the remark may appear harmless on the surface, its real meaning becomes clear if one looks „deeper.“ For the psychotic person actual reality is wiped out and an inner reality has taken its place.

The „realist“ sees only the surface features of things; he sees the manifest world, he can reproduce it photographically in his mind, and he can act by manipulating things and people as they appear in this picture. The insane person is incapable of seeing reality as it is; he perceives reality only as a symbol and a reflection of his inner world. Both are sick. The sickness of the psychotic who has lost contact with reality is such that he cannot function socially. The sickness of the „realist“ impoverishes him as a human being. While he is not incapacitated in his social functioning, his view of reality is so distorted because of its lack of depth and perspective that he is apt to err when more than manipulation of immediately given data and short-range aims are involved. *„Realism“ seems to be the very opposite of insanity and yet it is only its complement.*

The true opposite of both „realism“ and insanity is productiveness. The normal human being is capable of relating himself to the world simultaneously by perceiving it as it is and by conceiving it enlivened and enriched by his own powers. If one of the two capacities is atrophied, man is sick; but the normal person has both capacities even though their respective weights differ. The presence of both reproductive and generative capacities is a precondition for productiveness; they are opposite poles whose interaction is the dynamic source of productiveness. With the last statement I want to emphasize that productiveness is not the sum or combination of both capacities but that it is some thing new which springs from this interaction.

E. Fromm, *Man for Himself* (1947a), pp. 88-90.

## 6. Productiveness as „psychic health“ and „mature development“

Those needs which he shares with the animal – hunger, thirst, need for sleep and sexual satisfaction – are important, being rooted in the inner chemistry of the body, and they can become all powerful when they remain unsatisfied.[...] But even their complete satisfaction is not a sufficient condition for sanity and mental health. These depend on the satisfaction of those needs and passions which are specifically human, and which stem from the conditions of the human situation: the need for relatedness, transcendence, rootedness, the need for a sense of identity and the need for a frame of orientation and devotion. The great passions of man, his lust for power, his vanity, his search for truth, his passion for love and brotherliness, his destructiveness as well as his creativeness, every powerful desire which motivates man's actions, is rooted in this specific human source, not in the various stages of his libido as Freud's construction postulated.

Man's solution to his physiological needs is, psychologically speaking, utterly simple; the difficulty here is a purely sociological and economic one. Man's solution to his human needs is exceedingly complex, it depends on many factors and last, not least, on the way his society is organized and how this organization determines the human relations within it.

The basic psychic needs stemming from the peculiarities of human existence must be satisfied in one form or other, unless man is to become insane, just as his physiological



needs must be satisfied lest he die. But *the way* in which the psychic needs can be satisfied are manifold, and the difference between various ways of satisfaction is tantamount to the difference between various degrees of mental health. If one of the basic necessities has found no fulfillment, insanity is the result; if it is satisfied but in an unsatisfactory way – considering the nature of human existence – neurosis (either manifest or in the form of a socially patterned defect) is the consequence. Man has to relate himself to others; but if he does it in a symbiotic or alienated way, he loses his independence and integrity; he is weak, suffers, becomes hostile, or apathetic; only if he can relate himself to others in a loving way does he feel one with them and at the same time preserve his integrity. Only by productive work does he relate himself to nature, becoming one with her, and yet not submerging in her. As long as man remains rooted incestuously in nature, mother, clan, he is blocked from developing his individuality, his reason; he remains the helpless prey of nature, and yet he can never feel one with her. Only if he develops his reason and his love, if he can experience the natural and the social world in a human way, can he feel at home, secure in himself, and the master of his life. It is hardly necessary to point out that of two possible forms of transcendence, destructiveness is conducive to suffering, creativeness to happiness. It is also easy to see that only a sense of identity based on the experience of his own powers can give strength, while all forms of identity experience based on the group, leave man dependent, hence weak. Eventually, only to the extent to which he grasps reality, can he make this world his; if he lives in illusions, he never changes the conditions which necessitate these illusions.

Summing up, it can be said that the concept of mental health follows from the very conditions of human existence, and it is the same for man in all ages and all cultures. *Mental health is characterized by the ability to love and to create, by the emergence from incestuous ties to clan and soil, by a sense of identity based on one's experience of self as the subject and agent of one's powers, by the grasp of reality inside and outside of ourselves, that is, by the development of objectivity and reason. [...]*

Regardless of whether we speak of „mental health“ or of the „mature development“ of the human race, the concept of mental health or of maturity is an objective one, arrived at by the examination of the „human situation“ and the human necessities and needs stemming from it. It follows [...] that mental health cannot be defined in terms of the „adjustment“ of the individual to his society, but, on the contrary, *that it must be defined in terms of the adjustment of society to the needs of man*, of its role in furthering or hindering the development of mental health. Whether or not the individual is healthy, is primarily not an individual matter, but depends on the structure of his society. A healthy society furthers man's capacity to love his fellow men, to work creatively, to develop his reason and objectivity, to have a sense of self which is based on the experience of his own productive powers. An unhealthy society is one which creates mutual hostility, distrust, which transforms man into an instrument of use and exploitation for others, which deprives him of a sense of self, except inasmuch as he submits to others or becomes an automaton. Society can have both functions; it can further man's healthy development, and it can hinder it; in fact most societies do both, and the question is only to what degree and in what directions their positive and negative influence is exercised.

E. Fromm, *The Sane Society* (1955a) pp. 66-69 and 72-73.



## 7. Productiveness as biophilous orientation

Biophilia is not constituted by a single trait, but represents a total orientation, an entire way of being. It is manifested in a person's bodily processes, in his emotions, in his thoughts, in his gestures; the biophilous orientation expresses itself in the whole man. The most elementary form of this orientation is expressed in the tendency of all living organisms to live. [...] We observe this tendency to live in all living substance around us; in the grass that breaks through the stones to get light and to live; in the animal that will fight to the last in order to escape death; in man who will do almost anything to preserve his life.

The tendency to preserve life and to fight against death is the most elementary form of the biophilous orientation, and is common to all living substance. Inasmuch as it is a tendency to *preserve* life, and to *fight* death, it represents only *one* aspect of the drive toward life. The other aspect is a more positive one: living-substance has the tendency to integrate and to unite; it tends to fuse with different and opposite entities, and to grow in a structural way. Unification and integrated growth are characteristic of all life processes, not only as far as cells are concerned, but also with regard to feeling and thinking. [...]

The full unfolding of biophilia is to be found in the productive orientation. The person who fully loves life is attracted by the process of life and growth in all spheres. He prefers to construct rather than to retain. He is capable of wondering, and he prefers to see something new to the security of finding confirmation of the old. He loves the adventure of living more than he does certainty. His approach to life is functional rather than mechanical. He sees the whole rather than only the parts, structures rather than summations. He wants to mold and to influence by love, reason, by his example; not by force, by cutting things apart, by the bureaucratic manner of administering people as if they were things. He enjoys life and all its manifestations rather than mere excitement.

E. Fromm, *The Heart of Man* (1964a), pp. 45-47.

If we speak of love of life we must first try to understand each other better about the concept of life. It may seem simple to you. You will say life is the opposite of death. The person or animal that is alive can move by himself, and react to stimuli; the dead organism can do nothing of the kind, and in addition it decays and can not preserve itself, as a stone or a piece of wood can. True enough, that is an elementary way to define life; however, we might try to describe the quality of life a little further. Life always tends to unite and integrate; in other words, life by necessity is a process of constant growth and change. Indeed, when growth and change cease, there is death. Life does not grow wild and unstructured; every living being has its own form and structure implanted in its chromosomes. It can grow more fully, more perfectly, but it can not grow into what it was not born to become.

Life is always a process; a process of changing and unfolding; a process also of constant interaction between the constitutional structure and the environment into which it was born. An apple tree can never become a cherry tree; but each can become a more or less beautiful tree, depending on their constitutional endowment and on the environment in which it lives. The degree of moisture and sun that may be a blessing to



one plant will be a curse for another. It is not different with man; but unfortunately most parents and teacher know less about humans than a good gardener knows about plants. [...]

When someone says about a person that „he really loves life,“ most people understand precisely what is meant. We refer to a person who loves all phenomena of growth and aliveness, one who is attracted to a growing child, the growth in an adult, a growing idea, a growing organization. To him, even that which is not alive, like a stone or water, becomes alive and that which is alive attracts him not because it is big and powerful, but because it is alive. Often you can even recognize the lover of life by his facial expression. There is a radiance in his eye and also in his skin, something glowing in and around him. When people „fall in love,“ they love life, and that is the reason they attract each other. But if this love of life is too weak to last, they fall out of love again and do not understand why their faces are the same and yet not the same any longer.

Is the love of life something in which people differ only in degree? How good if this were so, but, unfortunately, there are people who do not love life, who „love“ death, destruction, illness, decay, disintegration. They are not attracted by growth and aliveness, except that they dislike and want to strangle them. They hate life because they cannot enjoy it or control it. They suffer from the only true perversion that exists - i.e., to be attracted to death. [...]

This attitude, however, is difficult to experience in a culture that emphasizes results instead of processes, things instead of life, that makes means into ends and that teaches us to use the brain when the heart should be involved. Love for another person and love for life are not something that can be achieved in a hurry. Sex, yes, but not love. Love requires pleasure in stillness, an ability to enjoy *being* instead of *doing*, *having* or *using*.

Erich Fromm, „Do We Still Love Life“ (1967e), *passim*.

## 8. Productiveness as life furthering syndrome

Love, solidarity, justice, reason are interrelated; they are all manifestations of the same productive orientation that I shall call the „life-furthering syndrome.“ On the other hand, sadomasochism, destructiveness, greed, narcissism, incestuousness also belong together and are rooted in the same basic orientation: „life-thwarting syndrome.“ Where one element of the syndrome is to be found, the others also exist in various degrees, but this does not mean that someone is ruled either by the one or by the other syndrome. In fact, people in whom this is the case are the exceptions: the average person is a blend of both syndromes; what matters for the behavior of the person and the possibility of change is precisely the respective strength of each syndrome.

As to the neurophysiological conditions for the development of the two respective kinds of passions, we must start out from the fact that man is unfinished and „uncompleted.“ Not only is his brain not fully developed at birth, but the state of disequilibrium in which he finds himself leaves him as an open-ended process to which there is no final solution.

But is he – being deprived of the help of instincts and equipped only with the



„weak reed“ of reason by which he deceives himself so easily – left without any help from his neurophysiological equipment? It seems that this assumption would miss an important point. His brain, so superior to that of the primate not only in size but also in the quality and structure of its neurons, has the capacity to recognize what kinds of goals are conducive to man's health and growth, physically as well as psychically. It can set goals leading to the realization of man's real, rational needs, and man can organize his society in ways conducive to this realization. Man is not only unfinished, incomplete, burdened by contradictions; he can also be defined as a *being in active search of his optimal development*, even though this search must often fail because external conditions are too unfavorable. [...]

The position taken here assumes that man has an immanent goal, that man's biological constitution is the source of norms for living. He has the possibility for full development and growth, *provided the external conditions that are given are conducive to this aim*.

This means that there are specific environmental conditions conducive to the optimal growth of man and, if our previous assumptions are correct, to the development of the life-furthering syndrome. On the other hand, to the extent these conditions are lacking, he will become a crippled, stunted man, characterized by the presence of the life-thwarting syndrome. [...]

The question, then, that confronts us is: Which are the environmental conditions that are conducive to the full development of man's potentialities? [...]

The historical record as well as the study of individuals indicate that the presence of freedom, activating stimuli, the absence of exploitative control, and the presence of „man-centered“ modes of production are favorable for the growth of man; and that the presence of the opposite conditions is unfavorable. Furthermore, an increasing number of people have become aware of the fact that it is not the presence of one or two conditions that have an impact, but a whole system of factors. This means that the general conditions conducive to the fullest growth of man – and, of course, each stage of individual development has its own specific conditions – can only be found in a social system in which various favorable conditions are combined to secure the right soil.

Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973), pp. 285-286 and 290-292.

## 9. Productiveness as the outcome of activating stimuli and of neuronal activity

In psychological and neurophysiological literature the term „stimulus“ has been used almost exclusively to denote what I call here a „simple“ stimulus. If a man is threatened with danger to his life, his response is simple and immediate, almost reflex-like, because it is rooted in his neurophysiological organization. The same holds true for the other physiological needs like hunger and, to a certain extent, sex. The responding person „reacts,“ but *he* does not act – by which I mean to say he does not actively integrate any response beyond the minimum activity necessary to run away, attack, or become sexually excited. One might also say that in this kind of response the brain and the whole physiological apparatus act for man.



What is usually overlooked is the fact that there is a different kind of stimulus, one that stimulates *the person to be* active. Such an activating stimulus could be a novel, a poem, an idea, a landscape, music, or a loved person. None of these stimuli produce a simple response; they invite you, as it were, to respond by actively and sympathetically relating yourself to them; by becoming actively *interested*, seeing and discovering ever-new aspects in your „object“ (which ceases to be a mere „object“), by becoming more awake and more aware. You do not remain the passive object upon which the stimulus acts, to whose melody your body has to dance, as it were; instead you express your own faculties by being related to the world; you become active and productive. The simple stimulus produces a *drive* – i. e., the person is driven by it; the activating stimulus results in a *striving* – i. e., the person is actively striving for a goal.

The difference between these two kinds of stimuli and responses has very important consequences. Stimuli of the first, simple kind, if repeated beyond a certain threshold, are no longer registered and lose their stimulating effect. (This is due to a neurophysiological principle of economy that eliminates the awareness of stimuli that indicate by their repetitiveness that they are not important.) Continued stimulation requires that the stimulus should either increase in intensity or change in content; a certain element of novelty is required.

Activating stimuli have a different effect. They do not remain „the same“; because of the productive response to them, they are always new, always changing: the stimulated person (the „stimulee“) brings the stimuli to life and changes them by always discovering new aspects in them. Between the stimulus and the „stimulee“ exists a mutual relationship, not the mechanical one-way relations  $S \rightarrow R$ .

This difference is easily confirmed by anybody's experience. One can read a Greek drama, or a poem by Goethe, or a novel by Kafka, or a sermon by Meister Eckhart, or a treatise by Paracelsus, or fragments by the pre-Socratic philosophers, or the writings of Spinoza or Marx without ever getting bored – obviously, these examples are personal, and everyone should replace them by others closer to him; these stimuli are always alive; they wake up the reader and increase his awareness. On the other hand, a cheap novel is boring on a second reading, and conducive to sleep. [...]

The description given so far needs to be qualified by stressing that it is not only the stimulus that counts. The most stimulating poem or person will fail completely with someone who is incapable of responding because of his own fear, inhibition, laziness, passivity. The activating stimulus requires a „touchable“ stimulee in order to have an effect – touchable not in the sense of being educated, but of being humanly responsive. On the other hand, the person who is fully alive does not necessarily need any particular outside stimulus to be activated; in fact, he creates his own stimuli. The difference can be clearly seen in children. Up to a certain age (around five years) they are so active and productive that they „make“ their own stimuli. They create a whole world out of scraps of paper, wood, stones, chairs, practically anything they find available. But when after the age of six they become docile, unspontaneous, and passive, they want to be stimulated in such a way that they can remain passive and only „re-act.“ They want elaborate toys and get bored with them after a short while; in brief, they already behave as their elders do with cars, clothes, places to travel, and lovers.

There is another important difference between simple and activating stimuli. The



person who is driven by the simple stimulus experiences a mixture of release, thrill satisfaction; when he is „satisfied“ (from the Latin *satis-facere*, „to make enough“), he „has enough.“ The activating stimulation, on the contrary, has no satisfaction point – i. e., it never makes the person feel he „has enough,“ except, of course, when normal physical tiredness sets in.

I believe that one can formulate a law based on neurophysiological and psychological data in reference to the difference between the two kinds of stimuli: the more „passivating,“ a stimulus is, the more frequently it must be changed in intensity and/or in kind; the more activating it is, the longer it retains its stimulating quality and the less necessary is change in intensity and content.

Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973), pp. 269-271.

The nervous cells show a remarkable degree of activity, as well as integration. In contrast to assumptions underlying the stimulus-response psychology, „the brain is not merely *reactive* to outside stimuli, it is itself spontaneously *active*.“<sup>2</sup> [...] Spontaneous electrical activity of brain cells begins in embryonic life and never ceases. [...]

Another neurophysiological phenomenon seems to point to the fact of the brain's need for activation: that of the so called pleasure areas in the brain. [...] The investigations of R. G. Heath<sup>3</sup> show that stimulation of the septal region can produce sexual arousal, or in the reverse that sexual arousal appears in the EEG as being connected with the septal region. But Heath has taken an important step forward by observations that seem to transcend the hedonistic scheme altogether. I am referring to his finding that electrical stimulation of the septal area can result in an experience of *active interest*, such as for instance intellectual or other kinds of interest not related to the satisfaction of appetites like sex and hunger. He quotes one instance where in the process of solving an interesting mathematical problem, activity of the septal region was found in the EEG and he believes that it is likely that the activation of the pleasure area can result from the process of taking an active interest in the world outside (in my own terminology this would be a productive interest rather than a passive-receptive one). In other words, his discoveries point to the fact that man's active interest in the world outside is grounded in the very structure of the brain, and hence does not need to be fostered by extrinsic rewards. If man is lacking this active interest he is sick, he suffers indeed from a severe sickness which, however, Heath does not consider as a psychotic depression.

The important conclusion from these findings is that the person incapable of seeking for pleasure and - on a higher level of personality - of being actively interested in people, things, ideas, is *sick*, not as the axiom says „normally“ inert.

E. Fromm, „Is Man Lazy by Nature“ (1991h);  
in English so far not published paper written in 1974.

<sup>2</sup> Livingston, R. B., 1967: „Brain Circuitry Relating to Complex Behavior“, in: *The Neurosciences, A Study Program*, ed. by G. C. Quarten, T. D. Melnechuk, F. O. Schmitt, Vol. 1, New York 1967 (Rockefeller Univ. Press), pp. 499-515, here S. 501.

<sup>3</sup> Heath, R. G., 1964: „Pleasure Response of Human Subjects to Direct Stimulation of the Brain: Psychologic and Psycho-dynamic Considerations“, in: R. G. Heath (Ed.), 1964, *The Role of Pleasure in Behavior*, New York 1964 (Harper and Row).



## 10. Productiveness as being mode of existence

The mode of being has as its prerequisites independence, freedom, and the presence of critical reason. Its fundamental characteristic is that of being active, not in the sense of outward activity, of busyness, but of inner activity, the productive use of our human powers. To be active means to give expression to one's faculties, talents, to the wealth of human gifts with which – though in varying degrees – every human being is endowed. It means to renew oneself, to grow, to flow out, to love, to transcend the prison of one's isolated ego, to be interested, to „list,“ to give. Yet none of these experiences can be fully expressed in words. The words are vessels that are filled with experience that overflows the vessels. The words point to an experience; they are not the experience. The moment that I express what I experience exclusively in thought and words, the experience has gone: it has dried up, is dead, a mere thought. Hence being is indescribable in words and is communicable only by sharing my experience. In the structure of having, the dead word rules; in the structure of being, the alive and inexpressible experience rules. (Of course, in the being mode there is also thinking that is alive and productive.) [...]

Being implies the faculty of being active; passivity excludes being. However, „active“ and „passive“ are among the most misunderstood words, because their meaning is completely different today from what it was from classic antiquity and the Middle Ages to the go period beginning with the Renaissance. In order to understand the concept of being, the concept of activity and passivity must be clarified. [...]

The modern sense of activity makes no distinction between *activity* and mere *busyness*. But there is a fundamental difference between the two that corresponds to the terms „alienated“ and „non-alienated“ in respect to activities. In alienated activity I do not experience myself as the acting subject of my activity; rather, I experience the *outcome* of my activity – and that as something „over there,“ separated from me and standing above and against me. In alienated activity I do not really act; I am *acted upon* by external or internal forces. I have become separated from the result of my activity. The best observable case of alienated activity in the field of psychopathology is that of compulsive-obsessional persons. Forced by an inner urge to do something against their own wills – such as counting steps, repeating certain phrases, performing certain private rituals – they can be extremely active in the pursuit of this aim; but as psychoanalytic investigation has amply shown, they are driven by an inner force that they are unaware of. An equally clear example of alienated activity is posthypnotic behavior. Persons under hypnotic suggestion to do this or that upon awakening from the hypnotic trance will do these things without any awareness that they are not doing what they *want* to do, but are following their respective hypnotists' previously given orders.

In non-alienated activity, I experience *myself* as the *subject* of my activity. Non-alienated activity is a process of giving birth to something, of producing something and remaining related to what I produce. This also implies that my activity is a manifestation of my powers, that I and my activity and the result of my activity are one. I call this non-alienated activity *productive activity*.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> I used the terms „spontaneous activity“ in *Escape from Freedom* and „productive activity“ in my later



„Productive“ as used here does not refer to the capacity to create something new or original, as an artist or scientist may be creative. Neither does it refer to the product of my activity, but to its *quality*. A painting or a scientific treatise may be quite unproductive, i.e., sterile; on the other hand, the process going on in persons who are aware of themselves in depth, or who truly „see“ a tree rather than just look at it, or who read a poem and experience in themselves the movement of feelings the poet has expressed in words – that process may be very productive, although nothing is „produced.“ Productive activity denotes the state of inner activity; it does not necessarily have a connection with the creation of a work of art, of science, or of something „useful.“ Productiveness is a character orientation all human beings are capable of, to the extent that they are not emotionally crippled. Productive persons animate whatever they touch. They give birth to their own faculties and bring life to other persons and to things.

„Activity“ and „passivity“ can each have two entirely different meanings. Alienated activity, in the sense of mere busyness, is actually „passivity,“ in the sense of productivity; while passivity, in terms of non-busyness, may be non-alienated activity. This is so difficult to understand today because most activity is alienated „passivity,“ while productive passivity is rarely experienced. [...]

We human beings have an inherent and deeply rooted desire to be: to express our faculties, to be active, to be related to others, to escape the prison cell of selfishness.

Erich Fromm, *To Have Or to Be?* (1976a), pp. 88-92 and 100.

#### References

Erich Fromm:

- 1941a: *Escape from Freedom*, New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1941.
- 1947a: *Man for Himself. An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1947.
- 1955a: *The Sane Society*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1955.
- 1964a: *The Heart of Man. Its Genius for Good and Evil*, New York: Harper and Row, 1964.
- 1967e: „Do We Still Love Life?,“ in: *McCalls*, New York, Vol. 94 (August 1967), pp. 57 and 108-110.
- 1973a: *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1973
- 1976a: *To Have Or to Be?*, New York: Harper and Row, 1976.
- 1991h: „Is Man Lazy by Nature“; in English so far not published paper written in 1974.

---

writings.