Landis_B_and_Tauber_E_S_1971

On Erich Fromm

Edward S. Tauber and Bernard Landis

"On Erich Fromm," in: B. Landis and E. S. Tauber (Eds.), *In the Name of Life. Essays in Honor of Erich Fromm*, New York (Holt, Rinehart and Winston) 1971, pp. 1-11.

Dr. Bernard Landis received his Ph.D. in psychology from the New School for Social Research and his training in psychoanalysis from the Postdoctoral Program at New York University. Since 1963 he has been at Cornell University Medical College where he is an Associate Clinical Professor as well as Associate Attending Psychologist at New York Hospital (Payne Whitney Psychiatric Clinic). He is also engaged in private practice. His book *Ego Boundaries* was published in 1970.

Dr. Edward S. Tauber Tauber received his medical degree from Johns Hopkins University. He is a member of the American Psychoanalytic Association, and he is a Fellow and a supervising and training analyst of the William Alanson White Institute of Psychiatry, Psychoanalysis and Psychology, and has previously served as the Institute's Chairman of Faculty. In addition, he is Adjunct Professor of Psychology at Yeshiva University. He has been actively engaged in conducting studies in perception and sleep research, and has coauthored a book on dreams—*Prelogical Experience: An Inquiry into Dreams and Other Creative Processes.* He maintains a private practice in New York City.

Erich Fromm is concerned with a transformation of life experience, not simply with adaptive modifications of personality. He challenges conventional standards through fresh and precise inquiry to expose their pretenses and lifelessness. The search for truth, he makes clear, is every man's domain, not restricted to scholars and specialists. His all-absorbing concern is the unfolding of life and, as a consequence, the radical and uncompromising critique of all individual and social factors that impede the development of man and his possibilities „to become what he could be."

It is this spirit that forms Fromm's radical approach to psychoanalysis. Stressing the importance of growth, he sees that the achievement of sanity is not to be found in submission, or power, oriented security operations but through efforts to be authentically oneself. Indeed, to Fromm, the aim of life is the process, fundamental to the nature of human existence, of giving birth to oneself.

Although some comprehensive studies of Fromm's work, past and ongoing, have already been made and others are anticipated, in this celebration volume we would like to sketch an over-view of Fromm's main theoretical ideas. In particular, we would like to refer to certain important themes that are touched on repeatedly throughout Fromm's works and constitute much of the substance of his theoretical position, but have not as yet been put into strong relief.

Of major significance in the history of

psychoanalytic theory has been Fromm's development—over a more than forty year span—of a comprehensive dynamic model of man in which his existential disequilibrium and the sociobiological necessity for assimilation and socialization have replaced the physiologizing instinct schema of Freud. Human passions and motives thus arise mainly through the vicissitudes of man's search for relatedness and identity rather than through instinctual thrust.

Perhaps the most insufficiently recognized theme in Fromm's overall [002] writings is his biological frame of reference. This orientation is based on the recognition of the biological conditions of man as he slowly emerged from the animal kingdom. A new configuration evolved with the striking cortical development of man's brain, the diminished importance of instinctive determination in contrast to the rest of the animal kingdom, and the emergence of the unique phenomenon of self-awareness. The convergence of these facts forms the basis for what Fromm calls man's existential dichotomy. Within this framework, Fromm developed a concept of anxiety and the possibilities of coping with it.

Discussing these issues in *The Art of Loving* Fromm writes:

> „This awareness of himself as a separate entity, the awareness of his own short life span, of the fact that without his will he is born and against his will he dies, that he will die before those whom he loves, or they before him, the awareness of his aloneness and separateness, of his helplessness before the forces of nature and of society, all this makes his separate, disunited existence an unbearable prison. He would become insane could he not liberate himself from this prison and reach out, unite himself in some form or other with men, with the world outside.
>
> The experience of separateness arouses anxiety; it is, indeed, the source of all anxiety. ...
>
> The deepest need of man, then, is the need to overcome his separateness, to leave the prison of his aloneness."

Man is inescapably compelled, therefore, to find a solution to the central question posed by life—that is, how to transcend his separateness and relate himself to his world. Fromm delineates two contrasting modes of relatedness: regression to earlier and often archaic forms of relatedness, or to hope-oriented, affirmative responses in the direction of becoming fully human through developing one's creativity, productivity, and ability to love. Each individual has the potential for the most archaic as well as the most progressive solutions. Historically, Fromm sees in the emergence of the great humanist religions and philosophies—prophetic Old Testament religion, Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Greek philosophy—the decisive turn from the regressive to the progressive orientation.

The different solutions man finds to this human condition are the many expressions of human nature. The essence of man's nature is not identical with any of these solutions but consists in the existential contradiction in man's biological constitution. This contradiction, which in itself is not a [003] moral issue, is common to all men, biologically as well as psychologically. It gives rise to certain imperative needs: there is a need for the experience of identity together with a need for a frame of orientation, a picture of his world and of his society in which he can locate himself and which makes sense of his life. Additionally, man needs a substitute for the largely lost instinctive determination.

In Fromm's theory, character structure, in the dynamic sense, serves this purpose. It is not innate as far as its contents are concerned, but is nevertheless determined by man's biological needs (which are by no means only instinctual) and by the conditions of nature under which he has to survive. In *Man for Himself* Fromm has delineated a set of character orientations that go beyond the Freudian theory of libido development by stressing the processes of socialization and the structures of relatedness.

Because of his deep concern and attention to these processes, it has been inferred that Fromm is a culturalist. Fromm, however, is not a culturalist in the common sense of that term whereby man is conceptualized as a *tabula rasa* on which a given culture writes its text. Furthermore, Fromm does not share the current concept of culture or cultural patterns as formulated by Karen Horney, Ruth Benedict, or Margaret Mead. Quite removed from this culturalist position, Fromm deals with the dynamic concept of the socioeconomic process (in Marx's sense) wherein culture essentially forms a superstructure but not the basis. At the same time, for Fromm, the biologically given conditions of human existence remain the psychological basis of personality development. This combination of a biological viewpoint with a sociological one is among Fromm's signal contributions to a theory of man.

In his studies of the ways in which society affects the answers man finds to the questions posed by life, Fromm has described in considerable detail how social patterns may bend man against his real human interests. He observed how significant characteristics and behavior patterns of major importance to a nation or class cluster to form what he called the „social character." Internalized and shared by most of the members of society, the social character—whose positive and negative aspects depend on the particular society—shapes action and thought so that people want to do what they have to do to perpetuate the particular society or class. In addition, character structure not only enables man to make quasi-automatic responses rooted in his character system but also permits him to feel satisfaction through acting in accordance with his particular character structure. [004]

Through the medium of social character, human energy in its general form is transformed into the specific activity patterns that a particular society needs for its functioning. In this way society both furthers and obstructs human development. As Fromm sees it, the social conditions obstructing human development are neither accidental nor the result of the ill will or stupidity of certain individuals. They have their own laws, and major social change is possible only by the combination of two factors: new socioeconomic conditions that permit it, and increased awareness in a large part of the population that makes it possible to undertake the necessary changes.

It may interest some readers to see how Fromm utilizes the construct of social character to integrate dynamic psychoanalytic concepts with Marx's theory. In Beyond the Chains of Illusion Fromm observes that: „Marx was capable of connecting a spiritual heritage of the enlightenment humanism and German idealism with the reality of economic and social facts, and thus to lay the foundations for a new science of man and society which is empirical and at the same time filled with the spirit of the Western humanist tradition."

However, Fromm believes that in Marx's theory the relationship between the economic basis of society and the ideology of the society was inadequately explained. Fromm sought to remedy this by developing further the construct of social character as an intermediary between the socioeconomic structure and the ideas and ideals prevalent in a society. That Fromm seeks to relate such apparently contradictory theories as psychoanalysis and Marxism may seem a paradox. Yet the paradox disappears when one considers that both are humanistic disciplines concerned with understanding, via a dynamic and dialectical approach, the reality of man's life—one with the social-economic reality, the other with the intrapsychic and interpersonal reality.

Beyond this, he has called attention to a fact that had been almost completely neglected: Marx, although not in a systematic way, had developed a dynamic psychological theory—which in many ways influenced Fromm's thinking. According to Marx, writes Fromm, „the dynamism of human nature is primarily rooted in this need of man to express his faculties, drives and passions toward the world, rather than to use the world as a means for the satisfaction of his physiological

necessities." The concept of self-activity, so crucial in Marx's thinking, appears in Fromm's concept of productivity. This is in contrast to the principle of tension reduction, [005] which has dominated the Freudian theory of motivation and which Fromm sees as having only limited application.

Also intrinsic to Fromm's model of man is his view of the unconscious, which extends the traditional concept of a repository of instinctual drives and repressed memories. Fromm sees unconscious contents as containing all of man's nature: all his potentialities, from being archaic man, a beast of prey, and an idolater, to being fully human with the capacity for reason and love.

In addition to those aspects of Fromm's theory mentioned so far, we would like to touch briefly on certain other significant findings in the fields of clinical psychoanalysis and analytical social psychology. Stimulated by Bachofen's work on matriarchy, with which he became acquainted at the beginning of his psychoanalytic career, Fromm was perhaps the first one to recognize the power and intensity of the affective bond of the child, of both sexes, to the mother; he enriched understanding of the complex nature of this bond, previously viewed within a narrow sexual focus.

In this context, Fromm was the first to use as a psychological metaphor the biological concept of symbiotic relationship. He developed the construct of malignant symbiosis in which the person has hardly separated from the parent figure, usually the mother, the process of individuation being almost completely stunted. In this form, the mother experience represents death, and her womb a tomb. Fromm also delineated less malignant forms of symbiosis in which the interaction between the „partners" is less crippling. In the most favorable circumstances the mother experience represents life, protection, the nourishing earth.

Previously, Fromm had written about the nature of aggression as being either reactive, in the defense of vital interests under attack, or characterological, as a result of „unlived life." Based on his present research, Fromm further distinguishes three different kinds of aggression, each of which has its own genesis: (a) defensive aggression as a reaction to a threat to vital interests, a form of aggression man shares with all animals; (b) sadism, the passion for total control of a living being, including the desire to hurt and torture; (c) necrophilic destructiveness, the hate against life itself and the passion to transcend life by destroying it.

In regard to the last form of aggression, Fromm has, in recent years, made an important formulation, distinguishing between biophilia, the love of life, and necrophilia, the attraction to and desire for all that is unalive, decaying, or purely mechanical. This concept, which seems to throw new [006] light on the processes of normal and pathological living, is a basic modification of Freud's theory of life and death instincts. It includes the earlier view that the love for life and the love for death are the most fundamental strivings in man; however, in contrast to Freud's theory, necrophilia is not seen as a normal biological tendency but as a pathological one that can stem from a variety of causes. *In The Heart of Man*, Fromm describes it as the malignant form of Freud's „anal character." Clinically, Fromm has demonstrated (in lectures and in a manuscript to be published soon) how dreams, free associations, and behavior permit recognition of the presence and intensity of biophilic versus necrophilic strivings. The strength of biophilic tendencies in a person is held to be a decisive factor for the possibility of change.

As part of this brief survey of Fromm's contributions, it should be mentioned that he advanced the application of psychoanalysis to the historical process, in particular to further the understanding of early Christianity, Protestantism, Fascism, and democratic capitalism. He has also undertaken two large-scale studies in the field of analytic social psychology, one in the early thirties on authoritarian and democratic character formations among German blue- and white-collar workers and one, which was recently published, on the character structure of peasants in a small Mexican village.

Fromm's orientation is not anti-Freudian. He believes that Freud's major discoveries of unconscious processes, of the dynamic nature of character, of the liberating and curative effect of bringing unconscious contents into awareness are the essence of psychoanalysis. In his formulations, Fromm has sought to extend the range of Freud's contributions by freeing them from the confines of libido theory. It is also characteristic of his work that he strives to reawaken the early radical spirit of psychoanalysis that emerged with Freud's first discoveries.

Fromm has also attempted to construct a system of ethical values that is based not on authority or revelation but on the knowledge of human nature. Independence, truth, and love are the qualities that man acquires when he liberates himself from symbiosis and fixation, anxiety, and greed; they are at the same time the supreme values of humanistic ethics. In the development of these ideas, Fromm has assumed that the most crucial ethically relevant polarity is that between „having" and „being," which corresponds to his unproductive and productive attitudes. Buddhist thinking, which is based on an analysis of man's existential condition without [007] mystification or submission to irrational authority, has, Fromm believes, influenced him in his search for the foundation of ethical norms in the nature of man.

It has always been Fromm's conviction that alienation, lack of integrity, and hence a defective sense of identity, constitute major constrictions in the individual's psyche, and have become everybody's problem in contemporary industrial society. In *Man for Himself* he writes:

> „Our moral problem is man's indifference to himself. It lies in the fact that we have lost the sense of the significance and uniqueness of the individual, that we have made ourselves into instruments for purposes outside ourselves, that we experience and treat ourselves as commodities and that our own powers have become alienated from ourselves. We have become things and our neighbors have become things. The result is that we feel powerless and despise ourselves for our impotence."

In arguing against identifying mental health with adaptation, he has spoken of the „pathology of normalcy" and discussed the problem of being sane in an insane society. Early in his work he stated that an alienated person, capable only of relating to the world „objectively" without being able to experience it subjectively, is in some ways no less impaired than the psychotic person who is so immersed in subjective feelings as to be unable to grasp the world objectively.

Fromm's extensive knowledge of philosophy, theological and biblical history, the social sciences, and political issues led him to write several books that are not directly related to psychoanalysis: May Man Prevail, a critical analysis of the cold war and of Soviet socialism; You Shall Be as Gods, a discussion of the concepts of God, man, and history in the Old Testament and in the Talmudic and Hassidic literature, as well as an analysis of the style of the Psalms; and Marx's Concept of Man, an introduction to Marx's humanistic philosophy. Also his active engagement in the cause of peace and socialism has been rare in the psychoanalytic world.

In personal encounters Fromm always seeks the other's independent growth. He asks, implicitly and explicitly, that the other develop his own uniqueness. Emerson once noted that, as a teacher, there was no „wish in me to bring men to me, but to themselves." And so with Fromm.

Even as Fromm depicts society's decisive role in shaping men's character, he makes it explicitly clear that each person must take the responsibility [008] for his own life. That is to say, while Fromm finds society culpable, he insists that man is responsible for his actions. This is not an irreconcilable dichotomy, since he is referring to two different though interacting ways of looking at a situation at any one time—from an individual point of view and from a social perspective.

In his concerned yet unsentimental approach to the analytic process, Fromm has been influenced by Zen teaching. A combination of Eastern spiritual thought with scientific psychoanalysis may seem like another paradox; both systems, however, are concerned with man's nature and his transformation. There are more specific parallels. In both there is a focus on immediate experience—on clearly distinguishing between what is real and what only seems real—rather than relying so much on words and explanations, for words often are used unwittingly to avoid emotions or to provide rationalizations. Fromm's view of the analyst is that he should be capable of absolute concentration—focused on developing skill and competence in illuminating the other person, averse to irrelevant details, and opposed to idolatry and status needs.

Fromm has amplified his sense of the analytic process, delineating those characteristics that an analyst should aim to develop as far as possible:

> „The analyst understands the patient only inasmuch as he experiences in himself all that the patient experiences; otherwise he will have only intellectual knowledge about the patient, but will never really know what the patient experiences, nor will he be able to convey to him that he shares and understands his [the patient's] experience. In this productive relatedness between analyst and the patient, in the act of being fully engaged with the patient, in being fully open and responsive to him, in being soaked with him, as it were, in this center-to-center relatedness, lies one of the essential conditions for psychoanalytic understanding and cure. The analyst must become the patient, yet he must be himself; must forget that he is the doctor, yet he must remain aware of it. Only when he accepts this paradox, can he give „interpretations" which carry authority because they are rooted in his own experience. The analyst analyzes the patient, but the patient also analyzes the analyst, because the analyst, by sharing the unconscious of his patient, cannot help clarifying his own unconscious. Hence, the analyst not only cures the patient but is also cured by him." [From *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*] [009]

This concept that the patient and therapist heal each other precludes stereotyped exchanges; it generates new experiences and facilitates true maturity and respect. One must develop the ability to give of himself but there has to be a receiver of the gift; if the exchange is not mutual it is ineffective. Only in a reciprocal and charged encounter can the most dreaded—as well as the richest—parts of the personality become bearable and permissible to experience.

Fromm has written little about psychoanalytic therapy and technique (though he plans to do so during the next four years); but yet in his teaching seminars over the last thirty years he has shared his concepts and methods in the context of detailed case history presentations. In the thirties he began to move away from the Freudian views and methodology of his psychoanalytic training. He opposed that form of the genetic approach that transforms psychoanalysis into artifactual historical research, having observed how often the classic method dwells on past events and „interprets" unconscious experiences by lifeless reconstruction.

His understanding of psychoanalysis led him to develop an active technique. Early in his career he noted the tendency to misuse free association, which is often in the service of resistance. Thus he does not hesitate to bring significant aspects of the patient's life into focus from the very start, thereby helping the patient to move more quickly from the surface to the depth. The overriding goal of his analytic therapy is the patient's experience of, rather than theorizing about, his unconscious reality. This experience is both frightening and exhilarating; the deeper it goes, the greater the liberating effect—but also greater is the chance of transitory disturbances that may be difficult to deal with in the ordinary professional setting.

In Fromm's approach, the analyst aims at constant confrontation of the patient with his dissociated desires and fantasies, mobilizing his healthy strivings for greater integration and productiveness. This process—not soothing words —affords genuine reassurance and hope. The greatest encouragement is to be taken seriously, to be told the truth, and to develop trust in one's efforts to help oneself. Fromm believes that when such confrontation does not lead to mobilization, the psychoanalytic method cannot be helpful.

The nature of Fromm's orientation to psychoanalysis has been further described by one of the editors (E.S.T.) in the *American Handbook of Psychiatry*: [010]

> [Fromm considers it essential] „that psychoanalysis shall penetrate as deeply and as speedily as possible to the very core of the patient's life, to locate his tenaciously held, unreal, unconscious solution to his separateness, to waste no time on the consequences of his problem and on his adjustments, but to force him to face his resistances and give no quarter. This process is carried out in a setting where the analyst is his full self with the patient. The analyst is not waiting, figuring things out, cautiously weighing what the patient can tolerate because, Fromm regretfully asserts, most delays are in the service of the therapist's anxiety anyway. The therapist should reveal, by his own genuine interest, dedication, openness and true participation, that there is an urgency to grasp life, to live, to search, and to dare uncertainty. Fromm rejects the notion that the analyst must be the passive one. This does not discard the precious ability to listen with all one's powers, but passivity can be exploitive when it merely serves to disguise the analyst's own unaliveness. ...
>
> He uses, so to speak, his scientific eye to know what is going on, to keep a perspective, but he helps the person to emerge by his own aliveness, by his own daring to know and to feel. He believes it is imperative that the patient be confronted as early as possible with the fact of the patient's decision to live or to die. There should be a feeling of urgency to live. The analyst has to identify carefully the point in his life at which the patient is stuck in a rut, and he must differentiate between the secondary consequences of the basic difficulties so that he does not grapple with the consequences of a problem but rather with the problem itself. He sees the individual as involved in what amounts to a religious dedication to resolve the feeling of separateness or aloneness. The patient himself may not be aware of the intensity and importance of the particular pattern of resolution through which he is living. The analyst must grasp this motif and bring it fully and richly to the patient's attention. These false solutions to the life problem may consist in the desire to be at mother's breast, at mother's hand, on mother's lap, or under mother's protection, or to submit to father's command. These false solutions must be brought into focus because they prevent any real relatedness to the world, to people, to work and to love. All life's energy is centered around nourishing the false solutions—all activity is organized to foster the idolatrous goals. The therapist must himself strive to achieve the very goals that represent the highest potential for himself. Only if the analyst sets himself the task of being fully [011] responsive and aware can he genuinely face the patient's false solutions constructively, unhypocritically and hopefully.
>
> Fromm realizes he is talking about an ideal for himself, and for all of us. He knows that we all fall short, but that does not mean that we become cynics, that we take the easy path. If we have no responsibility to live, we cannot deal with the lives of others."

As some of the contributors to this volume show, we are faced with the danger that within several decades life may end on our planet. Air, water, and soil pollution threaten

the integrity of our biosphere; yet the economies of most nations are organized to produce these dangers, as well as the unthinking depletion of other resources. We are menaced by nuclear, chemical, and biological warfare, yet our unyielding commitment to military technology guarantees that the risk curve will go up. The development of the corporate state seems inevitably correlated with declining democracy and increasing alienation and degradation of life experience. The outlook is grim. As Fromm conveys, only a sense of urgency and a radical refocusing on man's authentic concern for himself and his fellow men can provide the basis for real hope.

In this article we have written of Erich Fromm's commitment to life, his work and impact. He is a man whose words are ways and whose ways are reason, love and faith in man's possibilities. [015]