

Fromm: Basic Human Conditions and Needs

Erich Fromm began with the thesis (1941) that *freedom* is a basic human condition that posits a “psychological problem.” As the human race has gained more freedom by transcending nature and other animals, people have become increasingly characterized by feelings of separation and isolation. Thus, a major theme of Fromm’s writings is the concept of loneliness. To be human is to be isolated and lonely, because one is distinct from nature and others. Loneliness, also represents a basic human condition, and it is this characteristic that radically separates human nature from animal nature. The condition of loneliness, finds its ultimate expression in the problem of death. Unlike other animals, we know we are going to die. This knowledge leads to a feeling of despair. Most of us find death incomprehensible and unjust—the ultimate expression of our loneliness.

In response to the basic condition of freedom, human beings have two ways to resolve the problem. They can work with one another in a spirit of love to create a society that will optimally fulfill their needs, or they can “escape from the burden” of freedom into “new dependencies and submission” (1941). Such escape may alleviate feelings of isolation but it does not creatively meet the needs of humanity or lead to optimum personality development.

Escape Mechanisms

Fromm (1941) identified three common mechanisms of escape from freedom: authoritarianism, destructiveness, and automaton conformity. These mechanisms do not resolve the underlying problem of loneliness but merely mask it.

In **authoritarianism**, one seeks to escape the problem of freedom by adhering to a new form of submission or domination. Authoritarianism may assume either a masochistic or sadistic form. In its *masochistic* form, individuals who feel inferior or powerless permit others to dominate them. In its *sadistic* form, individuals seek to dominate and control the behavior of others. In either case, the root of the tendency comes from an inability to bear the isolation of being an individual self. The individual seeks a solution through *symbiosis*, the union of one’s self with another or with an outside power. A common feature of authoritarianism is the belief that one’s life is determined by forces outside one’s self, one’s interests, or one’s wishes, and that the only way to be happy is to submit to those forces.

Destructiveness seeks to resolve the problem of freedom, not by symbiotic union with other people or forces but by the elimination of others and/or the outside world. “The destruction of the world is the last, almost desperate attempt to save myself from being crushed by it” (1941). Fromm believed that signs of destructiveness are pervasive in the world, although it is frequently rationalized or masked as love, duty, conscience, or patriotism.

The majority of individuals seek to escape the problem of freedom through **automaton conformity**. They cease to be themselves and adopt the type of personality proffered by their culture. Like the chameleon who changes its color to match its surroundings, they become indistinguishable from the millions of other conforming automatons in their world. Such individuals may no longer feel alone and anxious, but they have paid a high price—the loss of the self.

Fromm perceived similarities between his mechanisms of escape and Karen Horney’s neurotic trends. The differences between them are that Horney’s emphasis was

on anxiety whereas Fromm’s was on isolation. Also, Horney’s neurotic trends are the force behind individual neurosis whereas the mechanisms of escape are forces in normal people. The mechanisms of escape are not satisfactory solutions. They do not lead to happiness and positive freedom. By relating spontaneously to love and work and by genuinely expressing our emotional, sensual, and intellectual abilities, we can become one again with other human beings, nature, and ourselves without forgoing the independence and integrity of our individual selves.

Existential and Historical Dichotomies

Fromm (1947) posited a number of existential dichotomies that arise simply from the fact that one exists. Loneliness is one of these. An **existential dichotomy**, as Fromm used the term, is a problem that has no solution because none of the alternatives it presents is entirely satisfactory. We desire immortality, but we face death; we would like to be at one with nature, but we transcend it. In short, we desire a certain kind of world, but we find the world into which we were born unsatisfactory.

Finding the given world unsuitable and unsatisfactory, we as humans attempt to create a more satisfying environment. In doing so, we may further create **historical dichotomies**, which are problems that arise out of our history because of the various societies and cultures that we have formed. The Inequitable distribution of wealth is a historical dichotomy, as is the long history of war.

It is important not to confuse or mislabel the two types of dichotomies. Historical dichotomies are created by people and thus they are not inescapable, as existential dichotomies are. They are products of history and therefore open to change. Together, existential and historical dichotomies structure our limitations and potentialities. They are the basis for our aspirations and hopes but at the same time they generate our frustrations. Fromm’s concern with existential dichotomies led him to focus on the having, and “being” orientations to life. He pointed out that these two modes of existence are competing for the spirit of humanity (1976). The **having**

mode, which relies on the possessions that a person *has*, is the source of the lust for power and leads to isolation and fear. The **being mode**, which depends solely on the fact of existence, is the source of productive love and activity and leads to solidarity and joy. People whose being depends solely on the fact that they *are*, respond spontaneously and productively and have the courage to let go in order to give birth to new ideas. Fromm believed that everyone is capable of both the having and being modes, but that society determines which of the modes will prevail (1976).

Basic Needs

The existential dichotomies that characterize the human condition give rise to five basic needs (1955). These needs stem from our existence and they must be met in order for a person to develop fully. Our primary drive is toward the affirmation of life, but unless we can structure our existence in such a way that it fulfills our basic needs, we either die or become insane. The five basic needs are

Relatedness The ability to relate to other people and love productively is not innate or instinctive in human beings. As people, we have to create our own relationships. We may seek to relate to others by submission or dominance, but these ultimately prove defeating. Only productive love, which involves care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge, prevents self-isolation.

Transcendence Human beings need to rise above the accidental and passive creatureliness of their existence by becoming active creators. If we cannot solve the problem of transcendence by creativity, we turn to destructiveness, which is an abortive method of fulfilling this drive.

Rootedness Rootedness refers to the need to feel that one belongs. Initially we find such belonging in our natural tie to our mother, but only insofar as we find new roots in a feeling of universal comradeship with all people can we feel at home in the world as a responsible adult.

Sense of Identity Human beings need to become aware of themselves as unique individuals. This sense of "I" requires experiencing oneself as distinct from others and as the center and active subject of one's powers. Failure to develop a sense of identity leads us to develop a sense of identification by unquestioning conformity to a group or whole.

The Need for a Frame of Orientation and Object of Devotion Each of us needs a stable and consistent frame of reference by which we can organize our perceptions and make sense of our environment. Such a thought system may be rational or irrational, true or false, but it is mandated by the very character of being human and leads to our devotion to a particular world view.

Human beings create society in order to fulfill these basic needs that arise independently of the development of

any particular culture. The five needs are given with the fact of our being human. But the type of society that humans create structures and limits the way in which the basic needs may be fulfilled. In other words, human personalities develop in accordance with the opportunities that their particular society allows. For example, in a capitalistic society, acquiring money is a means of establishing a sense of identity. In an authoritarian society, identifying with the leader or the state provides a sense of identity. Thus, one's final personality represents a compromise between his or her inner needs and the demands of the society.

Character Orientations and Love Relationships

Fromm identified five character types that are common in Western societies (1947). The primary difference between Fromm's theory of character types and orientations and that of Freud is that Freud envisioned the fixation of libido in certain body zones as the basis for future character types, whereas Fromm set the fundamental basis of character in the different ways in which a person deals with basic dichotomies. A person's character is determined in large measure by the culture and its objectives; thus, it is possible to speak of social character as qualities that are frequently shared by the people of a particular culture.

1. The **receptive orientation**. Receptive people feel that the source of all good things is outside themselves; therefore, they believe that the only way to obtain something they want is to receive it from an outside source. They react passively, waiting to be loved.
2. The **exploitative orientation**. Exploitative people, like receptive ones, feel that the source of all good things is outside, but they do not expect to receive anything good from others. Therefore, they take the things they want by force or cunning. They exploit others for their own ends.
3. The **hoarding orientation**. Whereas receptive and exploitative types both expect to get things from the outside world, hoarding personalities are convinced that nothing significantly new is available from others. Therefore, they seek to hoard and save what they already have. They surround themselves with a wall and are miserly in their relations to others.
4. The **marketing orientation**. The modern marketplace is the model for Fromm's fourth character orientation. The concept of supply and demand, which judges an article of commerce in terms of its exchange worth rather than its use, is the underlying value. Marketing personalities experience themselves as commodities on the market. They see their personality as a package that is to be sold and they develop those character traits that they believe will assist them best at any

particular moment in terms of being bought at the market. They are as they believe others desire them to be. Their basic character is empty. They may be described as opportunistic chameleons, changing their colors and values as they perceive the forces of the market to change.

5. The **productive orientation**. Fromm's description of the productive orientation tries to go beyond Freud's definition of the genital character, which suggested that the mature individual is capable of adequate functioning sexually and socially. Fromm sought to describe an ideal of humanistic development and moral stance that characterizes the normal, mature, healthy personality. The productive orientation refers fundamentally to an underlying attitude, a mode of relatedness, that governs the productive person's relationship to the world. These individuals value themselves and others for who they are. They find themselves as the center of their powers and they are able to realize their potentialities constructively. In using their powers productively, they relate to the world by accurately perceiving it and by enriching it through their own creative powers.

A further characteristic of the productive orientation is the use of humanistic rather than authoritarian ethics (1947). Whereas **authoritarian ethics** have their source in a Conscience that is rooted outside the individual, **humanistic ethics** represent true virtue in the sense of the unfolding of a person's powers in accordance with the law of one's own human nature and the assumption of full responsibility for one's existence.

The traits that arise from each of Fromm's character orientations have both positive and negative qualities, but on the whole Fromm saw the first four types as largely unproductive. A person may exhibit a combination of types. The first three types are reminiscent of Freud's oral and anal character types, and parallels can be drawn between Freud's and Fromm's typologies. However, in his discussion of the marketing orientation, Fromm is generally thought to have gone further and developed a new character type.

Fromm (1964, 1973) also distinguished between biophilous character orientations that seek to live life and a necrophilous character, which is attracted to what is dead and decaying and seeks to destroy life. The biophilous character is largely synonymous with the productive orientation. The desire to destroy emerges when life forces are frustrated.

A classic example of the necrophilous character is Adolf Hitler, who was fascinated and obsessed with death and destruction. In Fromm's descriptive case study (1973), Hitler emerges as a narcissistic and withdrawn personality who, because he could not change reality, falsified and denied it and engaged in fantasy. Hitler's coldness, apathy, and self-indulgence led to failures early in life and humiliations that resulted in a wish to destroy. This wish could not be recognized; instead, it was denied and

rationalized as defensive. maneuvers and actions undertaken on behalf of the glorious emerging German nation. What is unique is not the personality of Hitler, but the sociopolitical and historical situation that permitted a Hitler to rise to a position of great power. Fromm believed that malignant forms of aggression can be substantially reduced when socioeconomic conditions that favor the fulfillment of human needs and potential are developed in a particular society.

Parent-Child Relationships

The various character orientations come into being, in part, because of the particular love relationship that a child has experienced with primary caregivers. As children grow, they become increasingly independent, thus repeating the pattern of development of the species. This freedom brings with it insecurity, and the child will seek to re-establish the earlier security. Fromm described three basic kinds of parent-child relationships (1956).

In **symbiotic relationships**, two persons are related in such a way that one of the parties loses or never attains independence. One person is swallowed by the other person, the *masochistic* form of the symbiotic relationship. One person may swallow the other person, the *sadistic* form. The **withdrawal-destructiveness relationship** is characterized by distance rather than closeness. The relationship is one of apathy and withdrawal or direct expressions of hostility and aggression. **Love** is the productive relationship to others and the self. It is marked by mutual respect and the fostering of independence for each party.

The *receptive character* originates in a masochistic response to a symbiotic relationship. The *exploitative type* emanates from a sadistic pattern developed by the child who reacts destructively to parental withdrawal. The *marketing orientation* is the behavior pattern of a child who reacts to parental destructiveness by withdrawal. The productive orientation has its roots in the relationship of love.

Productive, biophilous people comprehend the world through love, which enables them to break down the walls that separate people. Productive love, Fromm asserted, is an art. We can master its theory and practice only if we make love a matter of ultimate concern. Productive love is the true creative answer to human loneliness, whereas symbiotic relationships are immature or pseudo forms of love.

Self-Love

Fromm (1956) distinguished among various types of love, such as brotherly love, motherly love, erotic love, love of God, and self-love. Of particular interest are his comments on self-love, which he saw as a prerequisite for loving others. It is important that we distinguish Fromm's concept of self-love and affirmation from the narcissistic self-indulgence that appears to be so prevalent in our day and that excludes the love of others. Today many people use "self-love" as a substitute for the more difficult task of

loving others. Fromm insisted that the ability to love requires the overcoming of narcissism (experiencing as real only that which exists within ourselves). We must strive to see other people and things objectively and to recognize those times when we are limited by our subjective feelings. We need to recognize the difference between our picture of another person, as it is narcissistically determined by our feelings about and interest in the person, and the person's reality as it exists apart from our own needs and emotions. Fromm's concept of self-love foreshadows Rogers's emphasis on congruence and Maslow's discussion of self-esteem.

—Personality Theories: An Introduction
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