

Man as a Contradiction

Philosophical Ideas of Erich Fromm

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Abstract: In his paper, the author argues that some of Fromm's ideas have the potential to answer bigger philosophical questions. Fromm's notion of the fundamental principle of individual relatedness to the world, in particular, allows us to understand the human nature much better. Fromm's way of seeing "man as full of contradictions" is provided with another argument. Sharing Fromm's interpretation of the human freedom, the author further discusses the problem of the original source of free will and makes the case that Fromm's understanding of love is productive for integrating contemporary theory of knowledge and philosophy of human beings. The author ultimately believes that the value of Fromm's theory lies, first of all, in the consistency of his humanistic vision.

Introduction

The humanistic doctrine of Erich Fromm significantly influences contemporary philosophical anthropology, ethics, social and political philosophy. In Russia, the study of Fromm's views started in the seventies of the last century (cf. Egorova 2004). In that period Fromm's philosophical work and diagnoses of social reality met with a severe ideological criticism. Moreover, his philosophical interest in human beings was characterized as an unscientific anthropologism (cf. Schwartzman 1971; Dobrenkov 1972; 1974; Kurkin 1983). Ten years later a number of papers and monographs pre-

senting Fromm's ideas in a more objective manner appeared, but his own works were essentially unknown. The next stage of studying his work was undoubtedly triggered by the publication of some of his works in Russia. For example, Pavel Gurevich published eight volumes of Fromm's works. According to Irina Egorova, those publications which were accompanied by analytic introductory articles, insightful commentaries, is when the serious study of Fromm's legacy began in Russia (cf. Verchenov 1980; Rutkevich 1991; Gurevich 1992; 1994). In my view, at present we can observe a revival of interest in Fromm's work (for example: Egorova 2004; Dobrenkov 2006; Zarirov 2012).

I was first exposed to Fromm's ideas when his books were published in Russian. As a member of International Erich Fromm Society (from 1993 on), I participated with my paper "Ecological Crisis and the Need for a New Metaphysics" in an International Symposium in Osnabrück (Omelchenko 1996) and with my paper "Philosophy as a Productive Orientation" in an International Conference in Magliaso (Omelchenko 2006).

1. On the Definition of the Human Soul

First of all, I would like to concentrate on Erich Fromm's understanding of human essence which stimulates the debate on the topic in the field of philosophy. His studies tell us that being connected to the surrounding world is an *essential* need of humans (see Fromm 1955a, pp. 22–66). This statement supports the assumption that the human essence (understood by me as comprising of mind, soul, spirit) is seen in *relation to*, or to be more precise, as an ensemble of the (inner and outer) steady universal relations of an individual to the world.

Hegel seems to express a similar opinion, when he writes that "everything that exists is in relation, and this relation is the truth of any existence" (Hegel 1974, p. 301). If any object essence is seen in relation, then we have a chance to catch the human essence which is after all in our mind (soul).

Now let us turn to the components of the human soul.

- (1) An individual is a representative of all humankind. An ensemble of the steady and universal relations between people makes up a fragment of human essence. If we try to clearly imagine an individual ab-

- solutely isolated from society, we would be very soon aware that such an individual would cease to exist as a human being. Such absolute loneliness is equal to nothingness. Thus, an aggregate of the steady universal relations among living people, as well as between past and future generations, forms one of the components of the human essence (logos).
- (2) There are steady relations inside the human body. These are neurodynamic regularities in the brain, mechanical, physical and chemical, physiological, genetic, and many other steady correlations in human corporeal organization. Such structures influence each other and form a general inner “pivot,” i.e., the human inner logos. Moreover, there is an interaction of outer and inner correlations, which is a condition of the human essence too.
 - (3) An aggregate of the steady universal relations between society and nature makes up yet another fragment of the human essence.

From this point of view, one may represent thought (mind, soul, spirit) as a *relation* between the human being and the surrounding world on the one hand, and as a human *relation* to the self (i.e., self-reflection phenomenon) on the other. These *relations* become visible and audible due to human language. The human mind is then located not only in the brain but at the same time beyond the bounds of the brain, between the human body and outside reality.

According to this approach, the human soul is located not only within the human body but also beyond its limits: between the individual and society, between the individual and the Cosmos. Having gotten thus far, we need now to understand the complexity of the question “what is the human soul,” as well as “what is its place of stationing.”

It turns out that the human soul has an extra-spatial and timeless character. It is in fact infinite and thus incapable of final definition. The final, exhaustive definition of a soul would mean its death, at least in theory. That is why, in particular, we can give no final definitions to the human being. The human soul’s infinity constitutes its immortality. In other words, the human being includes an immortal principle. Thus human nature itself presents a unity between the mortal and the immortal. In a sense, one may say that the human soul is entelechy of the infinite uni-

verse; it is a microcosm and cannot be entirely determined by social processes and structures.

2. Man Is Contradiction

In his works, Fromm discussed an important question: is it possible to speak of the human nature or essence in general, and if ‘yes’, how then can we define it? He rejected an “anthropological relativism” which refused to acknowledge the existence of any human essence and described human beings as products of their cultural conditions. Fromm, like many other scholars, began with an assumption that human nature does exist.

Fromm considered human nature as a combined product of historical evolution and certain innate mechanisms and laws. Human nature has such invariable factors as necessity to satisfy physiological needs and necessity to avoid moral loneliness. Man’s inalienable rights of freedom and happiness are founded in inherent human qualities: his striving to live, to expand and to express the potentialities that have developed in him in the process of historical evolution (Fromm 1941a, p. 244).

At the same time Fromm mentioned the difficulty in finding a satisfactory definition for the human nature. If one assumes a certain *substance* as constituting the essence of man, one is forced into a non-evolutionary, unhistorical position which implies that there has been no basic change in man since the very beginning of his emergence. Such a view is difficult to square with the fact that there is a tremendous difference to be found between our most undeveloped ancestors and civilized man as he appears in the last four to six thousand years of history. On the other hand, if one accepts an evolutionary concept and thus believes that man is constantly changing, what is left as an alleged “nature” or “essence” of man? (Fromm 1964a, pp. 83–4).

Fromm believed that the dilemma can be solved by defining the essence of man not as a given quality or substance, but as a *contradiction inherent in human existence*. This contradiction is to be found in two sets of facts. On the one hand, man is an animal, yet his instinctual equipment, in comparison with that of all other animals, is incomplete and not sufficient to ensure his survival unless he produces the means to satisfy his material needs and

develops speech and tools. On the other hand, man has intelligence, like other animals, which permits him to use thought processes for the attainment of immediate, practical aims; but man has another mental quality which the animal lacks. He is aware of himself, of his past and of his future, which is death; of his smallness and powerlessness; he is aware of others as others – as friends, enemies, or as strangers. Man transcends all other life because he is, for the first time, *life aware of itself*. Man is *in* nature, subject to its dictates and accidents, yet he *transcends* nature because he lacks the unawareness which makes the animal a part of nature – as one with it. Man is confronted with the frightening conflict of being the prisoner of nature, yet being free in his thoughts; being a part of nature, and yet to be as it were a freak of nature; being neither here nor there. Human self-awareness has made man a stranger in the world, separate, lonely, and frightened (Fromm 1964a, p. 84). In this discourse, you may hear existential motives.

According to Fromm, the contradiction he has described so far is essentially the same as the classic view that man is both body and soul, angel and animal, that he belongs to two worlds in conflict with each other. What Fromm wants to point out here is that it is not enough to see this conflict as the essence of man, that is to say, as that by virtue of which man is man. It is necessary to go beyond this description and to recognize that the very conflict in man *demand a solution* (Fromm 1964a, p. 84).

We agree with Fromm that the mentioned contradiction in itself requires a solution, and basically there are both regressive or progressive solutions. At any new level man has reached, new contradictions appear which force him to go on with the task of finding new solutions (Fromm 1964a, p. 87).

In my turn, I would like to demonstrate the ontological foundations for another fundamental contradiction in the human existence.

According to the Bible, when Moses wondered about His name, God answered: “I am that I am” (Ex 3, 14). In philosophy’s language, this reply means: “I am Being.” In other words, God’s name is Being. God Himself informed all people about it. His mystery is a mystery of the essence of nature, cosmos, life, human being; His characteristics are properties of infinite being, i.e., of rational-irrational essence of the universe.

This metaphysical interpretation of God invites to remember Parmenides’ categories of being and non-being. Now let us make the following comparisons:

God and devil,
being and non-being (nothing),
life and death,
good and evil,
love and hatred,
beauty and ugliness,
truth and falsehood,
“yes” and “no,”
affirmation and negation,
creation and destruction.

One may meet such a logic in Heidegger’s works: “‘Nothing’ is more original than the No and negation”; “The No does not come into being through negation, but negation is based on the No, which derives from the nihilation of Nothing”; “Nothing is the source of negation, not the other way about” (Heidegger 2000, pp. 217, 220). Using the religious terminology, one may explain these quotations: “Devil preceded the No and negation”; “Devil is the source of negation,” and so on.

Of course, a special thorough research of these oppositions is required. Obviously, we will be able to get very interesting results. But now we can note that truth, good, love and beauty acquire the single ontological foundation in metaphysical being which, in terms of religion, is named as God. Thus, God is being, life, good. Devil is nothing, death, evil. Being and non-being, life and death, good and evil constitute two opposite principles of the human nature and cosmic order.

We find a support for such a discourse in Fromm’s works: his *biophilic ethics* have their own principle of good and evil. Good is all that serves life; evil is all that serves death. Good is “reverence for life” (in terms of Albert Schweitzer), all that enhances life, growth, unfolding. Evil is all that stifles life, narrows it down, and cuts it into pieces (Fromm 1964a, p. 36).

3. Escape from “the Unbearable Lightness of Being”

Fromm’s *Escape from Freedom* (1941a) is still greatly appreciated in Russia. In particular, it is rather popular among those intellectuals who like dicta-

torship. Such sociologists have a very simple argument: people did not bear freedom, did not stand the test of freedom, so we need a new “iron hand,” new dictatorship. They are mistaken, however, concerning Fromm’s ideas, in spite of the note that his “book is devoted mainly to freedom as a burden and danger” (Fromm 1941a, p. 83).

According to Fromm (1941a, pp. 43, 23), the main theme of his book is as it follows. Man gains freedom in the sense of emerging from the original oneness with man and nature and becomes an “individual.” Freedom, though it has brought him independence and rationality, has made him isolated and, thereby, anxious and powerless. This isolation is unbearable and the alternatives he is confronted with are either to escape from the burden of his freedom into new dependencies and submission, or to advance to the full realization of positive freedom which is based upon the uniqueness and individuality of man.

In short, freedom has a twofold meaning for modern man: he has been freed from traditional authorities and has become an “individual,” but at the same time he has become isolated, powerless, and an instrument of purposes outside of himself, alienated from himself and others (Fromm 1941a, p. 229). Obviously, the problem of freedom also discloses a contradictory nature of man.

In Fromm’s view (1941a, p. 23), the escape from freedom has a totalitarian character, and so it is a pitiful and mean action not representing genuine human existence. Fromm is not defending dictatorship but arguing that understanding of the reasons for the totalitarian flight from freedom is a premise for any action which aims at the victory over different forms of tyranny.

As for me, I believe that freedom is the human essence, or attribute. It means that the human ceases to be human without freedom. In antiquity, slaves were called as ‘speaking tools’; they had no right to be humans. Therefore, freedom is a natural condition for human beings. For instance, man himself cannot cease to breathe, or “to escape from his own breath.” Just so man himself cannot escape from his own freedom, he escapes from “the unbearable lightness of being,” according to successful expression of Milan Kundera (for example, from loneliness or individual weakness).

Fromm speaks approximately in the same terms:

Once the primary bonds which gave security to the individual are severed, once the individual faces the world outside of himself as a completely separate entity, two courses are open to him since he has to overcome *the unbearable state of powerlessness and aloneness* (Fromm 1941a, p. 133 [my italics – N.O.]).

According to Fromm's viewpoint, the physiologically conditioned needs are not the only imperative part of man's nature. There is another part just as compelling, one not rooted in bodily processes but in the very essence of the human mode and practice of life: the need to be related to the world outside oneself, the need to avoid aloneness. Feeling completely alone and isolated leads a man to mental disintegration, just as physical starvation leads to death (Fromm 1941a, p. 40).

Fromm believes that there are various paths for a man to grow to "positive freedom." He can relate spontaneously to the world in love and work, in the genuine expression of his emotional, sensuous, and intellectual capacities; he can thus become one again with man, nature, and himself, without giving up the independence and integrity of his individual self. The other route open to him is to fall back, to give up his freedom, and to try to overcome his aloneness by eliminating the gap that has arisen between his individual self and the world. This second route is an escape from an unbearable situation which would make life impossible if it were prolonged. This path of escape, therefore, is characterized by its compulsive character, like every escape from threatening panic; it is also characterized by the more or less complete surrender of individuality and the integrity of the self (Fromm 1941a, p. 133).

Fromm explains that positive freedom consists of the spontaneous activity of the total, integrated personality. Freedom as the realization of the self implies the full affirmation of the uniqueness of the individual. Positive freedom also implies the principle that there is no higher power than this unique individual self, that man is the center and purpose of his life; that the growth and realization of man's individuality is an end that can never be subordinated to purposes which are supposed to have greater dignity (Fromm 1941a, pp. 220, 224, 225).

Now I would like to discuss the question of the deep source of the human free will which is, for Fromm, *freedom of choice*. In his opinion, "the problem of freedom of choice cannot be solved unless one considers that uncon-

scious forces determine us, though leaving us with the happy conviction that our choice is a free one” (Fromm 1964a, p. 90).

Let us assume that humans depend on unknown powers. However, if they are aware of them, the situation will change a little since then humans will depend on well-known powers. In other words, man always depends on something. Therefore, his behavior, his choice and motivation are determined by certain factors and these are not free. Moreover, in the surrounding world with the cause-effect links, it is impossible to find the human willing and practical action that would be in a miraculous way free from the principle of determination. For man, it remains to conclude a certain convention with those realized powers, to submit himself willingly to them and declare himself to be free.

But how in that case can one give a satisfactory interpretation of free will? In my view, the next solution is possible. In fact, my free will, my wanting means demonstration of my mental and physical condition, of inner state of my mind and body. The confessions of my “I” are revelations of my unconscious being. For instance, if I say that I want to go to a doctor, it will mean that my body or mind gives me the signal of its unsatisfactory condition, and my “I” speaks, transmits this signal coming from the depths of my organism and mind. My “I” expresses my mood *autonomously* and *freely*, I adequately reproduce that which is required for my personal system. My “I” would not be free if I declared my wish to go to a doctor under pressure of my relatives or friends who noted a pale color of my face.

Thus, free will does not mean an absence of any determination of my “I” when I express my wish. My “I” is found to be really free since I express *my and only my* inner state. By this, my “I” can absolutely know nothing about original, latent causes of the very organism to visit a doctor. My will can be mistaken or be a usual caprice. In this sense, free will does not presuppose cognition or realization of necessity.

Of course, my own will can depend on unconscious powers; cosmic logos or transcendent God are able to influence my inner state, and I cannot know about it. But here it is very important that my will is identical with my physical and mental state, and so my will is free and autonomous. Free will is a spontaneous impulse proceeding from my own mind or body. We have always free will that is an ability to manifest our inner states as living creatures in the infinite universe.

In my view, the human free will as a spontaneous impulse is primary, and the procedure of choice from available possibilities is secondary, derivative from this inner impulse of mental or physical condition of an individual.

4. Love as a Heuristic Principle

Fromm notes that in contemporary society emotions in general are discouraged. While there can be no doubt that any creative thinking – as well as any other creative activity – is inseparably linked with emotion, it has become an ideal to think and to live without emotions. To be “emotional” has become synonymous with being unsound or unbalanced. By the acceptance of this standard the individual has become greatly weakened; his thinking is impoverished and flattened. On the other hand, since emotions cannot be completely killed, they must have their existence totally apart from the intellectual side of the personality; the result is the cheap and insincere sentimentality with which movies and popular songs feed millions of emotion-starved customers (Fromm 1941a, p. 210).

I believe that horror, hatred, love, respect, and other feelings are a kind of human relation to the surrounding world. Any emotional relation to objects participates in understanding of these objects. The so-called “pure cognition,” i.e., cognition without feelings, does not exist. Our feelings influence our cognitive processes. They are able to promote finding the truth or misrepresenting the facts, and, moreover, our feelings themselves are a type of human cognition.

In my view, if “dread reveals Nothing” (in terms of Martin Heidegger), then love opens Being. Love is a natural property of the human soul coinciding with one’s cognitive abilities and having an effect on the process and result of knowledge. Love is the most optimal relation for understanding of the world and human being. Only love can help to achieve a heuristic success. It means, for example, that only a mother who loves her children is able to understand them.

The history of philosophy has many manifestations of the idea that love paves the road for reason to things and people. The contemporary intellectual situation also makes it important to consider love as a heuristic prin-

ciple, as an epistemological category. From this viewpoint, only those who love humans will be able to know the truth about them.

According to Fromm, “*love is union with somebody, or something, outside oneself, under the condition of retaining the separateness and integrity of one’s own self*” (Fromm 1955a, p. 31). This is a very interesting rational definition, but it does not adequately represent that human emotional relation which we call love.

The experience of love does away with the necessity of illusions. There is no need to inflate the image of the other person, or of oneself, since the reality of active sharing and loving permits us to transcend our individualized existence, and at the same time to experience ourselves as the bearers of the active powers which constitute the act of loving.

Love is one aspect of what Fromm has called the productive orientation: the active and creative relatedness of man to his fellow man, to himself and to nature. In the realm of thought, this productive orientation is expressed in the proper grasp of the world by reason. In other words, *the truth is opening to love*.

In Fromm’s view (1955a, pp. 31–2), productive love always implies a syndrome of attitudes; that of *care, responsibility, respect and knowledge*. If I love, I care – that is, I am actively concerned with the other person’s growth and happiness; I am not a spectator. I am responsible, that is, I respond to his needs, to those he can express and more so to those he cannot or does not express. I respect him, that is, I look at him as he is, objectively and not distorted by my wishes and fears. I know him; I have penetrated through his surface to the core of his being and related myself to him from my core, from the center, as against the periphery, of my being. By the way, the identity between “to love” and “to know” is contained in the Hebrew *jadoa* and in the German *meinen* and *minnen*.

In a word, love accompanies the deepest revelations of being. Being lays down one indispensable condition for its revelation – the thinker’s love. By this, being reminds us about its *ordo amoris* (Max Scheler). Nothing but reason filled with love is able to discover the essence of being. Therefore, to see the truth, reason must observe the surrounding world with love. In other words, the truth of being reveals itself towards loving reason.

Obviously, falling in love with knowledge is an additional condition for a heuristic success. The very word “philosophy” is symbolic: in order to

know the truth, it is important to love – not formally but really – wisdom, knowledge. People tend not to believe in love, however as they do not see it. It appears that this human relation, this feeling is rare in the world of people, and that is why we smile with skepticism when we hear of love, in particular of love connected to knowledge.

Philosophy as love for wisdom is in itself wisdom in the sense that it understands that it is not a certain container for *veritas rerum*, but is just a sincere love to the truth of being. One may say it is possible to contemplate wisdom only in the case when one truly loves it. In other words, philosophy as love for wisdom teaches love, including love to itself. Apparently, *love to philosophy* is an indispensable condition for its understanding.

Conclusion

In this paper, I tried to present some of Fromm's philosophical ideas including that of the contradictory character of human nature, which is discovered looking for the solution of the problem of freedom. The fundamental principle of individual relatedness to the world allows us to understand human nature much better. Fromm's conception of love is productive for making a contemporary theory of knowledge that is an integral part of the philosophy of human being.

Fromm's doctrine combines psychological and philosophical conceptions and conclusions. The most important value of this doctrine lies in its steady humanistic intention. The ideal of free development of personality is a supreme principle of Fromm's psychological analysis. The disclosing of the unique human faculties is possible only in this humanist way.

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