

Social Character and its Significance for the Art of Living

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Abstract: In Fromm's writings, philosophy and psychoanalysis are closely intertwined. The same holds true for Sigmund Freud's self-analysis, giving birth to the psychoanalytic framework in the 1890s. Today, psychoanalytic insights are indispensable whenever philosophers examine the knowledge of oneself or the art of living. The discussion is challenging for both sides. Ehrenberg's theory of *The Exhausted Self* poses fundamental questions: Does autonomy still promise liberation and insight or has it turned out to be a pathological agent promoting widespread depression, burnout and borderline symptoms? Erich Fromm's contributions help us understand the dynamics of the *False Self* (Winnicott) and its relationship to the socio-economic backgrounds of people. Fromm's philosophy focuses on a critical art of living instead of postmodern self-fashioning.

Social character and its significance for the art of living connects two paradigmatic features of Erich Fromm's thinking. Social character points out to a framework integrating psychoanalysis and sociology. The art of living sees individual and social practice in a broader perspective. What contributes to a good and meaningful life? Can we create a just and sane society? Do our values appeal to our own insights or do they put us in chains, as ideologies tend to do? These questions are often addressed by philosophers, and in this paper we will discover Fromm as a philosopher.

At first, however, we should ask why a psychoanalyst could be inclined to enter the field of philosophy at all. Sometimes psychoanalysis and phi-

losophy were happily married and sometimes they were happily divorced. Freud's psychoanalysis started off as a self-analysis and it was a philosophical project to a certain degree. In his letters to Fliess, Freud confessed, that working as a medical doctor seemed to be a detour (Freud 1985, p. 165 and 190). But Freud changed his views later on. He looked at philosophers as tourists who needed a Baedeker to travel through life. The pride to have one or to write such travel guides appeared a little bit narcissistic (Freud 1999c, p. 123). Freud himself kept the philosophical dimensions of his beginnings secret. Others followed him (see: Anzieu 1990). Biographers of Freud like Ernest Jones also played down the whole philosophical matter (Jones 1960; Bernfeld & Bernfeld-Cassirer 1981, pp. 142–7).

Freud kept his distance from philosophy. He felt uncomfortable in the world of rationalist theories or foggy introspective phantasies (Freud 1999a, p. 406). Many philosophers, so he admitted, could well be outstanding characters. But the psychoanalyst has to find out the subjective motivation of any philosophical system. He might come across hidden problems behind the logical surface. Thankfully he would receive some inspirations, but only as a matter of further scrutiny.

To cut a long story short: while philosophers play with interesting problems seldom will they find reliable solutions. After all, reading philosophical books evoked a mysterious suffering in Freud. Especially with regard to Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, he developed a painful double-phantasy (cf. Otte 2011, p. 113; Gödde 1991). Philosophical conceptions of the unconscious or of the drives, the interpretation of dreams and the parapraxis in daily life anticipated psychoanalytic insights. But never did Freud accept them as Baedekers for psychoanalysis.

Fromm did not suffer from these ambivalent attitudes towards philosophy. His psychoanalytic practice has always been ambitious in a philosophical sense. He wrote in a grounding essay on therapeutic practice: “I would say this is the hope for the human race, that in fact truth makes us free” (Fromm 2009, p. 8). Truth has no separated philosophical and psychoanalytic realms. Does a liberating spirit ask through which door it is allowed to come in?

Fromm, like many philosophers, asked: “Who am I?” This is not a rhetorical question, though we tend to give rhetorical answers. Fromm suggests that “It sounds like a full statement, but is actually a dissociated statement,

because we are not aware of the affective experience, which exists and yet does not come into our awareness” (Fromm 2009, p. 10). Rationalization is the merry-go-round of self-deception. The center may be peaceful, but you are never in it, moving in circles and arriving nowhere.

Does philosophy advocate this self-deception, blinded by big ideas? Karen Horney, Fromm’s colleague and a friend for many years, warned in her book on self-analysis:

The upshot of these considerations is the banal truth that if you want to analyze yourself you must not study only the highlights. You must take every opportunity to become familiar with this stranger or acquaintance that is yourself (Horney 1978, p. 182).

In the last decades, philosophers rediscovered historically existing connection between philosophy and psychoanalysis. *The Art of Living* became one of the most important topics with chart-climbing book written by both philosophers and psychologists. And some of these books and discussions involve more than a little bit of psychoanalytic seasoning. Fromm would not have been taken by surprise. He understood humanist ethics as an applied science of the art of living (Fromm 1947a). But how much of psychoanalysis is contained in that philosophical art?

Take Martha Nussbaum’s ground laying book *The Therapy of Desire: Her study of ancient Hellenistic ethics puts out amazing connections between philosophy and medicine:*

Philosophy heals human diseases, diseases produced by false beliefs. Its arguments are to the soul as the doctor’s remedies are to the body. (...) Correctly understood, it is no less than the soul’s art of life (Nussbaum 1994, p. 14).

These words do not advertise rationalization or set Baedekers up for sale.

Evidently, we have to translate a little bit. Ancient concepts like “nature” appear to be value-laden to us. We can never be sure to find the correct psychoanalytic term for the word “greed”, which plays its role in Fromm’s psychoanalysis and in his critique of modern consumerism. Imagine the concept of “ataraxia”, meaning the happy stillness of passions. Man enjoys a transparent self-awareness and grasps surprising sides of reality. Should

we understand it in terms of Freud's nirvana principle and accept that the death instinct works behind its back (See: Freud 1999b, p. 373; Fromm 1979a, p. 102–103)?

The trouble with these translations goes far beyond terminological matters. We will come across many unquestioned assumptions. They force us to evaluate and even to reinterpret parts of our theoretical framework. This is a crucial point of every demanding philosophical activity.

Is it worth the effort? “The problem of mastering, or at least accommodating, the passions was seen both in Greek and in early modern ethics as absolutely central to philosophy's goal of teaching how to live”, says philosopher John Cottingham in his book *Philosophy and the Good Life* (Cottingham 1998, p. 6). For him, psychoanalysis is the last act of this drama. Nobody understands the play if they only strolled in during that act.

Many authors are influenced by Pierre Hadot. He showed that some ancient philosophies included a therapeutic practice with daily exercises (Hadot 1991). *Having* a self was not what philosophers were looking for. *Being* a self was the challenge to become what you are. It will never be a gift that you take away with a smile. The philosophical self is a productive creation, Alexander Nehamas stressed in his book *The Art of Living* (Nehamas 2000, p. 18). It is inconsumable. The psychoanalytic art of living, Mari Ruti explains, is linked to creative activity. Nothing is done until you do it, nothing is clear until you try to understand it: “What it means to become a person (...) is far from self-evident” (Ruti 2009, p. 38). This art does not imply high ideals of the self or rigid practices.

Michel Foucault invented many influential terms and phrases, but *the care of self*, for example, must be rightly understood. The self is not an atomistic spirit hiding in the depth of man's mind. The self is the relation to the others and vice versa (cf. Schmid 1991, p. 244). Techniques of the self constitute a subject for himself as well as in the public and political spheres. The government of the self and the government of the others could therefore never be separated (Foucault 2012, p. 64). Tensions in everyday life indicate that clearly: Anyone who wants to tell the truth and feels anxious to do so will make that experience. Taking over a personal risk to utter what seems the right word shows him in the field of power. He will calculate the effects of his speech at the very first beginning and will perhaps modify what he has to say.

Fromm is not mentioned in these books by name, but his topics are central to them. Fromm and Foucault would agree that we missed the point if we restricted our self-analysis or the care of the self to our hidden private life. The art of living can hardly be an attempt to forget in which world we are all living together. My lifestyle is not my castle. For decades, we have witnessed attempts to suggest this and to create a market for soulful wellness. Fromm was a fierce critic of that spiritual business or transcendental product placement. He called it “the great shams” (Fromm 1989a, p. 11). Locking men in this well-furnished seclusion will not cure the ills of modern or postmodern times.

The topic of this section is dedicated to social character. Man is a *zoon politicon*, as Aristotle said, being a private individual as well. The two sides show a worrying dialectic today. Take an example: “Productive work calls for primary focus on reality external to one’s self”, stated a paper on stress and burnout published by the International Labor Organization. (Freudenberger 2011) Symptoms are spreading globally. The *European Working Conditions Survey* confirmed a strong growth of professional diseases associated with them. A study of the German Federal Chamber of Psychotherapists established that the number of workers and employees who were unfit to work due to burnout increased by fourteen times from 2004 to 2011 (cf. Bundespsychotherapeutenkammer 2012).

Many business-philosophies and codes of enterprise say that democratic leadership has been implemented. They claim to follow the ideas of humanistic management and acknowledge the worker or employee as a partner who will be heard. If it were so, this might be a good first aid to cure these ills. Obviously, burnout, depression and stress-related diseases are still spreading.

That seems to be exactly what we have to expect, if we follow medical sociologist Alain Ehrenberg. He launched a thesis named *The Exhausted Self*. Ehrenberg analyzed the changing faces of autonomy in our modern socioeconomic contexts: Being associated with freedom in the past, autonomy has become the duty of today and a source of increasing depression and psychiatric disorders (cf. Ehrenberg 2012, p. 26).

Societies experience negative consequences of deregulation. Among them are ones which change dominating norms and the relevance of the authorities. Interpersonal relationships have become porous and unreliable.

The individual self has to – but hardly can – compensate for the missing coherence.

These demands are fostering the contemporary disorders of narcissistic personalities. Autonomy changes from a promise into a disease-causing agent. Concurrently, philosopher Axel Honneth stated that individual self-realization came under the wings of rigid institutionalized expectations (cf. Honneth 2010, p. 207). These ideals of the selves will be reactive ones. They give rise to the ever-growing feelings of emptiness, of being superfluous and of losing one's own personal distinguishing marks. But should we call it, what Ehrenberg and Honneth are writing about, a self?

We must introduce more precise distinctions. Think of Winnicott's concept of the *false self*, defined by its lack of spontaneity and originality. People lead a mechanical life of emotional disengagement (Winnicott 1984). Winnicott assumed that this *empty self* is a hiding-place, where the self could find protection (cf. Fonagy et al. 2004, p. 202). Fonagy and colleagues spoke of the *disintegrated self*: patients lose the feeling of being the real author of their actions and thoughts (Allen et al. 2011, p. 356).

In a philosophical sense, it would be pointless or a misuse of words to talk of autonomy in these cases. The term is derived from the Greek words *autos* meaning self and *nomos* meaning law or governance (cf. Beauchamp & Childress 1989, p. 67). The *false self* and all kinds of forced autonomy simply do not play in this league.

What would Fromm have said about these discussions of today? His critical mantra goes like this: In non-productive character orientations, the demands of the “social role must become ‘second nature’, i.e., *a person must want to do what he has to do*” (Fromm & Maccoby 1970b, p. 18). Individuals strive to be what others want them to be. They will be aware of their alienated self as a nice or an awful packing and see themselves only from the outside (cf. Fromm 1992g, p. 96).

Being a self has to do with the freedom to be productive. Autonomy intends, in a Kantian sense, that man is his own purpose (Fromm 1947a, p. 7; Kant 1965, p. 50). The art of living is the practical dimension of the productive character. As a crucial experiment, it serves as a critical instance in the sense of Spinoza: *Veritas est index sui et falsi* (Spinoza 1976, p. 92). Fromm held that insights unconnected to practical issues to be a waste of time (cf. Fromm 1976a, p. 170). The art of living strives for the opposite and dares to do so.

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