



The Self-Conscious Person Above Social Pressures: Erich Fromm's Guidelines for Individual Liberation

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Abstract: Erich Fromm succeeded in embracing with equal depth all the main aspects of human existence: unconscious dynamics, social formative influences and self-determination of the human being as a conscious agent. This last aspect of Fromm's heritage allows us to speak of him as an existentially minded thinker. His analysis of human situation, theory of existential needs, view on human nature as undefined, theory of freedom and theory of being as opposed to having make a priceless contribution to the existentialist line of thought.

Keywords: Erich Fromm, personality, existentialism, freedom, awareness, being.

Being neither a psychoanalyst nor a social scientist my field is the psychology of personality and philosophical anthropology. These referential contexts define my view on Erich Fromm's heritage. I believe that the importance and contemporary relevance of Fromm's ideas deserve a far broader perspective than that of the couch.

I have been teaching classes on personality theories at Lomonosov Moscow State University and some other places for nearly 20 years. I am proud to say that my professor who taught this course before, in the 1970s-80s, when I was a student, was Bluma Zeigarnik, whose name is also associated with Berlin where she started her outstanding academic career.

While teaching my course, I gradually came to an insight regarding the very special place of Fromm's personality theory among all the classical personality theorists of the 20th century. Every author has been creating his or her own vision. But if we had to choose just one author whose theory would be the



most comprehensive, embracing in one coherent theory both deep psychological mechanisms, social and cultural influences in individual development and optional agentic self-determination capacities, this single choice would be Erich Fromm. This is why for me he is more than just one of the classical authors.

In my view, what can be labelled contemporary as opposed to old-school psychology started in the 1970s after what I would call a closed fracture in psychological science. After this fracture all psychology radically changed in many respects, and many new fields of study appeared that never existed before, but the most important change was the following. The dominant way of development of pre-fracture psychology was through the plurality of schools; each of them offered its own vision as an alternative to others, and often also its own language and explanatory principles. In post-fracture times the vector changed from a centrifugal to a centripetal one. The multitude of schools gave place to a complicated coherent field, the language was becoming an integrated one, and no new theory that would position itself as an alternative to all others had a chance to survive. Fromm was, as in many other respects, ahead of his time, trying to combine different contexts and even scientific disciplines in one theory of person-and-society.

I need not speak of Fromm as a prominent social scientist or as a revolutionary in psychoanalysis. Not less important seems his underestimated contribution to the understanding of our resources of being self-conscious agents overcoming the social and unconscious mechanisms (»chains«) that make us passive victims of alienated forces. Not only did he reveal our being conditioned by the society and by the unconscious, following the paths of Marx and Freud, but he also investigated the ways of liberation from them, following Spinoza's thrust. I will speak about Fromm as an existentialist who articulated many key tenets of the existentialist view on the human being much better than the authors whose names are usually associated with existentialism. For him there was no incompatibility but rather a complementary relationship between existentialism and psychoanalysis, like that between psychoanalysis and sociology; they comprised different dimensions of the same multidimensional picture.

This aspect of Fromm's heritage, explicated especially in *Man for Himself* (1947a), *The Sane Society* (1955a), *The Heart of Man* (1964a) and *To Have Or to Be?* (1976a), allows us to speak of him as an existentially minded thinker. He rarely, if ever, referred to existentialists, but his analysis of the human situation and the theory of existential needs (Fromm 1955a), his view of human nature as undefined (Fromm 1964a), his theory of freedom and theory of being as opposed to having (Fromm 1976a), make a priceless contribution to the existentialist line of thought.



First of all, I would like to specify what I mean by existentialism, because there is no unambiguous definition of this orientation in philosophy and psychology; a few years ago I was involved in an international group preparing the statute of the *World Association of Existential Psychotherapy* (its first congress took place in 2015 in London), and reaching a relative consensus on the basic definition of existential therapy took over a year. As for myself, I have been working at this definition since about 2000, and still cannot stop. Here are my

Definitions

- (1) The *existentialist worldview* means treating the world as a total uncertainty, the only source of bringing certainty into it being yourself, provided that you do not see yourself as the possessor of ultimate truth and that you validate your views in dialogical exchanges with your fellow humans.
- (2) *Existential psychotherapy* is a strategy of providing psychological help based on treating clients as conscious agents beyond and above their mental mechanisms. Reflective awareness and agentic capacities allow them to take responsibility for their lives and finding meaning despite the objective uncertainty and anxiety-provoking unpredictability of the future. Specific choices based on this responsibility are negotiated with other fellow persons in dialogical encounters, existential psychotherapy being a part of this process.

The most important point is that the existential approach is not a special school, alternative to other ones, like psychoanalysis (May 1967); it adds one more dimension neglected by psychoanalysis and begins where psychoanalysis ends. This was clearly phrased by Rollo May, the founder and the leader of the American branch of existential psychology and psychotherapy, who was at the same time a certified and practicing analyst, whose personal analyst was Erich Fromm.

What seems especially important in Fromm's ideas of the existential dimension of the human being is that these ideas were developed not in isolation from his views on the social and psychodynamic determinants of human conduct, but rather as complementary aspects of a unified picture.

Human nature

Fromm's view on the human essence, most pointedly articulated in *The Heart of Man* (1964a), gives a very convincing answer to the ancient philosophical



question: Is the human being essentially good, godlike by nature, or essentially evil, »a naked ape« not much different from other animal species? Fromm's answer is purely existentialist: »the essence of man [should be defined] not as a given quality or substance, but as a contradiction inherent in human existence« (Fromm 1964a, p. 112). We have no predetermined potentialities which would direct our development; the human essence lies in its universal transcendent capacity of developing in any direction, so to say, godwards or beastwards. Indeed, the history of the 20th century proved that there is no peak a human being could not reach and there is no baseness a human being could not fall down to.

»Man is neither good nor evil. If one believes in the goodness of man as the only potentiality, one will be forced into rosy falsification of the facts, or end up in bitter disillusionment. If one believes in the other extreme, one will end up as a cynic and be blind to the many possibilities for good in others and in oneself. A realistic view sees both possibilities as real potentialities, and studies the conditions for the development of either of them.« (Ibid., p. 119.)

This idea is absolutely accurate from the viewpoint of philosophical anthropology of our days, and it perfectly resonates with the most recent ideas on the challenge of uncertainty: we cannot expect that our nature or society will instruct us on what is the right way to live. We are to decide for ourselves at our own risk, thus creating ourselves through these decisions and defining ourselves, defining what we are indeed. I would say that the humane in us is a possibility (which may come true or not), a challenge (which we are to face proving our humanity or denying it), and a responsibility (for us to accept and to bear, if we dare).

The third factor

Fromm was the first to replace the traditional binary, biosocial view of the human being, which suggests that our sociocultural acquisitions make us humans, helping us to control impulses, by a trinary structure in which the person for himself has to overcome both biological impulses and social constraints. In Fromm's works (in particular in *The Sane Society*, 1955a), personality is treated not in terms of biosocial interaction; rather, both biological and social determinants appear as equally distant from the person proper. Both systems create fields that allow the person to function without awareness, needing no



freedom; an alternative is the personal field-independent way of awareness, awakening, choice and courage. Fromm described individual development as a sequence of births overcoming the initial »psychological symbiosis« (ibid, p. 25–27). Here we find an important paradox of human existence: human life and human well-being, as recent studies show, are based on social ties and social support; however, personality development above the level of collective mentality is possible only through overcoming these ties.

Some similar ideas can be found in Carl Gustav Jung's works of the 1930s (Jung 1954), but without much elaboration. Later, similar ideas have become more popular. Kasimierz Dabrowski (1964) wrote about »the third factor« of personality development, besides nature and nurture, being the person oneself. Viktor Frankl (1969) stated that it is not the character but the person that finally decides, the spiritual person that is capable of taking a detached attitude or position toward one's heredity, environment, needs, and character, though does it not often. Alexei Leontiev (1978) stated that both nature and nurture are premises of personality rather than its components, and the problem of personality refers to a special dimension distinct from the dimensions where biological and social mechanisms are located. The same idea was articulated by Fromm who wrote that a human being emerges through the transcendence of our inherited biological nature, and reason and consciousness lead us along this way (Fromm 1964a, p. 113). We may however deny this specifically human way and replace biological imperatives by social ones which also relieve us, in a similar way, from the burden of self-determination and choice.

Freedom as awareness

Fromm was the first to make freedom an object of psychological analysis. In *Escape from Freedom* (Fromm 1941a) he proposed a theory of freedom, including the distinction between *freedom from* and *freedom to*, the tight connection between freedom and responsibility and, due to the latter, an understanding of freedom as a burden for many who strive away from freedom rather than toward freedom.

In *The Heart of Man* (Fromm 1964a) he elaborated his theory of freedom further. Freedom, says Fromm, is »nothing other than the capacity to follow the voice of reason, of health, of well-being, of conscience against the voices of irrational passions« (ibid. p. 126). The issue of freedom is not a general, but a specific one: whether and to what degree is this person free? We have a chance of choosing good rather than bad inasmuch as we are clearly aware of the situation. Fromm listed six aspects of this awareness that may make us free:



(1) awareness of the good and the evil; (2) awareness of the way of acting that would be appropriate for attaining a goal; (3) awareness of your unconscious determinants; (4) awareness of options to choose between them; (5) awareness of eventual consequences of this or that choice; (6) the awareness that it is not enough just to be aware, but that we are to take action, to face challenges, to bear pain and adversities, to resist passions, to pay a price (*ibid.*, p. 128).

In his last book, *The Art of Being* (1989a), Fromm stressed again the importance of inner liberation rather than liberation from external constraints, though he is rather critical regarding most popular practices of »inner liberation.«

Overcoming narcissism

Narcissism, including social narcissism, sets boundaries between ourselves and reality; it replaces a transparent window to the world with a mirror where we see only ourselves. It screens us off from reality, and still worse, it is an obstacle for any dialogue, and existential dialogue is a relation into which we are entering open and ready for change, and which serves as a necessary condition for personality development and searching for shared values rather than imposing predetermined ones. In our postmodern world we cannot uncritically rely on values that someone has given us centuries ago, but we also cannot rely on our inner feeling alone. We check our values and criteria for choice against other people, finding a common ground for our actions and making a self-organized society. Narcissism is an antonym to dialogue, and also an antonym to tolerance, because narcissism, especially its social form, suggests that there is only one truth, and everything that deviates from it is a lie, a fake, a stupidity, an evil. Tolerance suggests that different people may have different truths and none of them is *a priori* supreme (however they need not be absolutely equal, and this can be found out *a posteriori*, in the course of their practical verification). This is why Fromm summarized the main message of all the major humanistic religions: »It is the goal of man to overcome one's narcissism« (1964a, p. 85).

Aliveness, biophilia, being

Fromm was one of the first authors who made life the object of psychological analysis, and his construct of biophilia vs. necrophilia is very important in this context. The main difference between them lies in the specifics of psycholog-



ical determinism. Necrophiles are determined by rules and regulations, and everything is for them pre-established and prescribed; there is no place for uncertainty, surprise, chance, play, creativity that together make up the main content of the world of biophiles. This distinction parallels the distinction between conformist vs. individualist ways of personality development (Maddi 1971) and the opposition of being »on tape« vs. being alive (Bugental 1991a). »Living is a fundamental business of life. We all do it only partially« (Bugental 1991b, p. 30). In this sense being alive means transcending both one's psychodynamic and one's socio-typical constraints and having the courage to decide for oneself.

Among the leading psychologists of the 20th century, Erich Fromm was probably the only one who succeeded in embracing with equal depth all the main aspects of human existence: unconscious dynamics, social formative influences and the self-determination of the human being as a conscious agent. Spinoza, who was the third referent author for Fromm, after Freud and Marx, stated in the fourth part of his *Ethics*, »Of Human Bondage, or the Strength of the Emotions,« that humans are enslaved by their affects; and in the fifth part, »Of the Power of the Understanding, or of Human Freedom,« that liberation is also possible (Spinoza 1677/1883). The same refers to society and its constraints: we are in a sense enslaved by them, but also keep the potential for liberation, though not all and not many make proper use of this potential. Fromm's message says that there is a sound alternative, though it is not warranted and requires much awareness and effort. No one can help being the object of social pressures, but following them without any choices is not the only option. In the case of an insane society, the person's creating his or her independent, personal philosophy as the supporting ground may be a real path away from being caught in social conflicts, and Fromm's works provide the guidelines for doing so.

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