

Psychotherapy Guidebook

# FROMMIAN INFLUENCE



Erwin Singer

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# Frommian Influence

*Erwin Singer*

*(Some Implications of Erich Fromm's Thoughts for the Practice of Psychoanalysis)*

To discuss Erich Fromm's thinking on psychoanalysis as a therapeutic process is a difficult task. He has written little directly related to this topic except for some passages here and there, most prominently in his book *The Forgotten Language*. However, he has contributed extensively in areas bearing significantly on the work of the practicing analyst, notably in delineating his conceptions on personality and its development. Therefore, the following paragraphs will deal mainly with his thoughts in these areas and their implications for psychotherapy.

## DEFINITION

Basically, Fromm maintains that neurological givens, i.e., the capacity for reason and consciousness, place man in a difficult position. Consciousness and reason acquaint us with several potentially very unpleasant realities: the time-limited nature of our existence, the fact that death is inevitable; our relative insignificance in the larger scheme of things, our being but drops of water in the sea, grains of sand on the beach; and finally, our lack of what

Fromm calls “rootedness,” that is, knowing and being known from core to core. Rootedness is almost an impossibility to attain. Man, Fromm insists, is unavoidably and always alone, though not necessarily lonely.

Given these “dichotomies” in living, Fromm proposes that we are constantly in search of ways to regain rootedness, constantly trying to find a road to overcome separateness in order to regain connection with the world and others. Fromm states that there are a variety of solutions in this quest to transcend the boundaries of one’s separate being, a variety of social answers to this biologically determined reality of separateness.

He schematizes these answers into two categories: the development of nonproductive orientations and the possibility of the growth of a productive stance. By nonproductive orientations Fromm means the attempt to join others, or the development of the illusion of joining others, via a multitude of nonproductive relationships. This, he proposes, is accomplished by forging positions of exploitation and manipulation; by hoarding to achieve power over one’s fellows; or, as he thinks rather prevalent today, by attempts to “market” oneself and make oneself marketable as a desirable commodity. All these and similar orientations are seen as nonproductive means of bringing about the illusion of reaching another person. They are in Fromm’s thinking essentially pathological character orientations. Juxtaposed to these nonproductive orientations, he posits a productive one characterized by

efforts to bring to others something of genuine value rather than the illusion thereof. The productive orientation is characterized by concern with, devotion to, and respect for others. Fromm believes that such an orientation of love in the widest sense of the term blossoms only when self-respect and concern for oneself, one's time of life and its limits, is paramount. We encounter in these formulations Fromm's concept that man against himself will be against others while man for himself will also be man for others. To some, this seems a paradox but really is not: Only the acceptance of one's own aloneness and separateness makes reaching others in their separateness possible, and carries with it the hope of alleviating loneliness.

It is well to remember Fromm's insistence on a single dominant drive in man: the drive to break the narrow confines of one's being and to gain contact with others. This can be done by creating, or if circumstances block this avenue, by destroying; thus, to Fromm, creating and destroying are simply opposite sides of the same basic impulse. Both positions bring about contact with others and the development of something new. It is as if Fromm maintained that man feels compelled to create even if by destroying, that the only thing the human being cannot tolerate is the maintenance of the status quo, whatever its nature. And he proposes that the avenues taken in this quest will parallel the basic socioeconomic lines and forces dominating a given culture and a given era.

In recent years Fromm has written prominently about what he refers to as “biophilia” — the love of life and creating — and “necrophilia” — the love of death and destruction. These concepts must be seen as subtle refinements of productive and nonproductive character orientations, brought about both by forces already outlined and by temperamental and/or biological tendencies. It would represent a gross misunderstanding of Fromm’s theoretical stance to imply, as is occasionally done, that biophilia and necrophilia are conceptually analagous to Freud’s biologically given life drive and death drive.

Finally, Fromm believes that an individual may find himself in a situation that makes the burden of his separateness, and/or the particular method he took to relieve this unbearable state, so repugnant that he will more or less abandon awareness of himself. A personal dilemma is thus seemingly solved by psychological suicide. Fromm proposes that by giving up consciousness, the person has rather perniciously staged an “escape from freedom.” What is deeply pathological in this state is that the sense of self, of being a free and therefore responsible being, is abandoned. This giving up of self for the sake of gaining connection represents to Fromm the deeper meaning of Oedipal strivings. No wonder that he sees in blind nationalism an expression of the Oedipus complex in our age.

## HISTORY



Thoughts expressed by Fromm have ancient and contemporary roots found in Eastern and Western thinking, and are refined by his clinical observations and acumen. Strains of existential thought from antiquity to the present-day are recognizable. Fromm has acknowledged Spinoza's significant influence, as well as that of Marx's writings. Strains of biblical thought and Zen insight in his comments are also noticeable.

Freud's monumental work moved Fromm to try to go beyond where Freud had to stop. As Tauber and Landis point out, Fromm is neither anti-Freudian nor simply a cultural relativist. His was primarily the effort to take psychoanalysis out of its predominantly biological orientation and to reformulate in sociological terms the gigantic human drama Freud had posited, without denying the biological strivings of the organism. It may be appropriate to suggest that these biological forces were made more relevant by Fromm's exposition of the human situation in which they occur, and by his proposing sociological and economic forces as additional dimensions in human character development, not the basis for it (Tauber and Landis, 1971).

It follows that early revisionists of Freudian thought, such as Adler, Jung, and a host of others, have made comments that seemed significant to Fromm, though obviously he differs from them markedly in his system and in his emphasis.

## TECHNIQUE

Similar to Freud, who wrote little on technique, Fromm has stayed away from the discussion of technical issues. He is more concerned with the nature of the analyst's stance, with his willingness to make an effort to enter the patient's experience, to meet him "from core to core." He deems this essential even if it implies that the patient is likely to learn a good deal about the psychological makeup of the analyst, and even though this may mean that the analyst is likely to learn a good deal that is new about himself. In *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*, Fromm makes this point succinctly when he says: "Hence, the analyst not only cures the patient but is also cured by him." Whatever furthers this process of deep engagement with essentials rather than with trivia, whatever furthers genuine introspection and examination of motivation, seems technically admissible; whatever detracts from this process, whatever interferes with the true learning of both participants, whatever smacks of the patient being given directions, and whatever furthers sham and superficiality is frowned upon. And all this in the hope that the patient may regain the freedom to choose; perhaps he will choose a productive orientation over a nonproductive one.

In summary, it must be recalled that Fromm is essentially a psychoanalyst committed to helping the patient achieve consciousness of what is dissociated. It is clear that he eschews libido theory and substitutes

sociological vantage points. Furthermore, much of supposedly psychoanalytic technique is avoided because the “original” traumas dissociated by the patient are not to be found in regressive, instinctual impulses that must be recalled; rather, they are found in the orientations the person chooses and develops vis-a-vis his dilemma of unrootedness.

## APPLICATIONS

Implicit in Fromm’s writings is an ingrained conviction that “the truth shall make you free.” Nowhere is there the suggestion that this is limited to some people or is not true for some of the dramatic emotional disorders of living. We may therefore assume that Fromm sees little limitation in the applicability of psychoanalytic therapy. If analyst and patient meet in seriousness to explore the motivations of a life and to achieve clarity about them, that will be curative in itself by helping the person shoulder the enormous burden that freedom entails. No wonder that many of his students and close collaborators have worked with, and continue to work with, people exhibiting manifestations of all kinds of difficulties in living.

Beyond this, Fromm seems firmly convinced that psychoanalytic insights can make significant contributions to our understanding of political, social, and economic problems. The very titles of his books, such as *The Sane Society*, *Marx’s Concept of Man*, *May Man Prevail?*, and *The Anatomy of*

Human Destructiveness, readily suggest his beliefs concerning the applicability of psychoanalytic concepts. But perhaps above all he sees the utility of these understandings for the process of education toward creative freedom.