

## **Erich Fromm: The Escape from Human Destructiveness**

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The great scholar and philosopher Erich Fromm is often referred to as a social-psychological theorist. One of his core arguments was that the most beautiful as well as the ugliest inclinations of man are not part of a fixed and biological human nature but result from the social processes which create man. Very early, Fromm saw human behavior as highly influenced by social, cultural and institutional forces (those that affected the individual within a society and those universal forces that have influenced humanity throughout history). He aimed at developing a profound interpretation of the various human passions resulting from the condition of existence of man. He said that we more or less created our own natures and rejected the notion that we were passively shaped by these forces, arguing that we shaped the social forces ourselves.

The reciprocal interaction between humans and their environments was clear to Fromm from the beginning.

Fromm believed that the types of conflicts people suffered were the product of the kind of society they have developed. However, he emphasized that we were not doomed to failure. Quite the contrary, he remained optimistic about our ability to solve problems, the problems we have all created.

Fromm was a psychoanalyst, a philosopher, a historian and anthropologist. He was a real social scientist. It is very difficult to classify him as a member of a single discipline. He was a well educated man. Born in Frankfurt, Germany, with a family deeply steeped in Orthodox Judaism, Fromm early developed an interest in philosophy. His father was a business man and his grandfather was a rabbi. His mother's uncle a well-known Talmudic scholar. As a consequence, Fromm was infused by the Jewish intellectual tradition of reason and experienced the emotional impact of being a member of a minority group. He lectured in the most important universities in the U.S. and I had the privilege of listening to him at the University of California in Berkeley.

He was also a professor of the University of Mexico and the director of the Mexican Psychoanalytic Institute.

Scholars in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should go back and carefully study Fromm's work: "Escape from Freedom"; "The Sane Society"; "The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness"; "Escape of Authority; and The Revolution of Hope."

The title of his first book, "Escape from Freedom", provides a clear indication of his vision of the basic human condition: loneliness and insignificance. The argument was that in the history of Western Civilization, people gained more freedom but came to feel more lonely, insignificant and alienated from one another. Conversely, the less freedom people have had, the greater their feelings of belongingness and security have been. This was a kind of crisis-solidarity-survivor logic. To expose this apparent paradox, he discussed the evolution of Western Civilization from the lower animals to the higher ones, noting the basic distinction between animal nature and human nature. Fromm strongly stressed the great flexibility of human behavior and pointed that as humans we know, and we are conscious of ourselves and of the world around us (or that we can learn to achieve these conditions).

He said that ancient people tried to escape their state of alienation from nature by identifying with their tribes or clans...

Fromm characterized the increasing freedom of Western people as freedom from but not as freedom to. We have become free from slavery and bondage, but we are not free to develop our full potentials and enjoy new types of freedoms. For him, the basic human dilemma was how to flee the sense of loneliness and insignificance, while escaping from freedom at the same time.

There are several mechanisms of escape: First, achieving positive freedom by reuniting with other people without giving up one's freedom and dignity. In this altruistic approach, humans relate to each other through work, love, sincerity and open expression of their emotional and intellectual abilities. Renouncing freedom does not lead to self expression nor to human and social development. Humans can also turn to psychological mechanisms which are authoritarian in nature, either masochistic (people feel inferior) or sadistic (striving for power over others in a negative manner); Second,

showing destructiveness (which is the opposite of authoritarian) by aiming at eliminating the interaction with others. The destructive person says to himself or herself “I can escape the feeling of my own powerlessness in comparison to the world outside myself by destroying the world; Third, erasing all differences between himself or herself and others. This is accomplished by becoming just like everyone else, which involves copying the rules and the logic that govern behaviors, actions or creations of other people.

Fromm proposed three escape mechanisms: symbiotic relatedness, withdraw and destructiveness, and love and solidarity. These components are valid descriptions in present time, and we should teach, explain and help to manage them because they manifest themselves in all settings.

Even though I don't fully subscribe all of Fromm's theories, I think it is important to study and learn from them. He has challenged scholars in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to think and act beyond the boundaries of disciplines and to reflect on how to evolve to a better society as a system of institutions.

As a philosopher, he emphasized formal learning and education. Though most people spend more time on informal learning through experience, Fromm always stressed the task of researching, accumulating and working with knowledge in order to become a better human being and to contribute to the real quality of life.

One of his main thesis was that life can be significantly impacted by participating in the foundation of serious knowledge. He invited humankind to be ignited by wisdom as a key factor for overcoming difficult circumstances and for stimulating growth and development of all human beings.

I have studied the complete works of Erich Fromm and have enjoyed them very much, specially his call to address the broad spectrum of social and institutional problems. Unfortunately, he lost perspective that without God, the norm is always chaos. With God, it is possible to satisfy the needs of the mind and the needs of the heart. The search for a more humane society without God lacks orientation. Imagination, creativity, and reverence are key roads towards faith...

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