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Erich Fromm's Psychological Concept of Humanism

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Abstract: Erich Fromm not only developed a still significant approach to social psychology, but he also represented a humanistic understanding of science that is groundbreaking for the social transformations of the present day. The article first attempts to show the religious and philosophical roots of his reception of humanism and then presents the psychological understanding of humanism that he refined and determines its significance for the present day. Fromm psychologically substantiates both the universality of man and his capacity for perfection by reflecting the existential situation of the human being as defined by brain development. With a different view of the unconscious, he then expands the psychological understanding of humanism. Instead of seeing what is unconscious primarily as the results of repressions, Fromm understands the unconscious as the universal human being with all facets of human potential. These potentials, however, only become conscious to the extent that social filters enable them to become conscious. Humanism is therefore critical of socially conditioned filters and their alienating dynamics in order to no longer experience the hitherto unconscious realization of the human potential as something alien but as something profoundly one's own.

Introduction: Humanism in times of crisis

The psychoanalyst and social psychologist Erich Fromm (1900-1980), known worldwide for books such as *The Art of Loving*, *Escape from Freedom,* and *To Have Or to Be?*, is one of the greatest humanists of the 20th century. Above all, the escalation of the Cold War and the threat of a nuclear Third World War prompted Fromm in the early 1960s to place all his hopes in a "renaissance of humanism." For Fromm, "humanism has always been a reaction to the threat of dehumanization, to a threat to the existence, even, of the human race" (Fromm 1963f, p. 71).

The current situation is experienced by many as similarly life-threatening: climate change, increasing social inequality, aggressive nationalist identity assurance, and the trans- and post-humanist utopias fueled by artificial intelligence, which mutate into dystopias on closer psychological examination and threaten humanity and being human today. A humanistic transformation is, therefore, particularly important for the necessary steps towards change at not only an economic, political, and social level but also at a therapeutic level (see Funk 2025).

Erich Fromm builds on the religious and philosophical approaches of humanism in the ancient world as well as the humanism of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Accordingly, humanism is characterized *"by faith in man, in his possibility to develop to ever higher stages, in the unity of the human race, in tolerance and peace, and in reason and love as the forces which enable man to realize himself, to become what he can be."* (Fromm 1963f, p. 69.)

Fromm aims for a "radical" humanism that draws from the roots (cf. Funk 1984; Biancoli 1992; Silva 1994; Durkin 2014). He thus expands the perspective towards the universal human being in the One World. On the one hand, this means that a "renaissance of humanism" is about humanity in general and about humans in a globalized world; on the other hand, Fromm's understanding of the human unconscious adds a very important perspective to humanism: For him, the unconscious represents the *universal* human being. Everything that is possible for humans can be found in the unconscious of the human species, meaning that the consciously perceived differences are largely the result of "social filters." These are created by culture and society to prevent certain expressions of human potential from becoming conscious or to repress them. Unconsciously, however, there is the universal human being. The more we become aware of this, the less strange and frightening the otherness of the other is to us.

After these indications, let us first ask what roots Fromm draws on in his understanding of humanism.

1. Roots of Erich Fromm's humanistic thought

Judaism and criticism of religion

Born on March 23, 1900, in Frankfurt am Main, Erich Seligmann Fromm grew up as an only child in an Orthodox Jewish family. As he himself confesses, he was most moved as a teenager by prophetic messianism, "where the promise applied: >nation shall not lift sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more<

(Is 2,4); when all nations will be friends, and when >the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea< Is 11,9)“ (Fromm 1962c, p. 5).

Fromm received his extensive Talmudic education initially in Frankfurt and later primarily during his studies in Heidelberg with Rabbi Salman Baruch Rabinkow (cf. Jung 1987; Funk 1990; Jacobs 2015). Rabinkow was as close to Chabad Hasidism as he was to the thinking of the Neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen. His work *Religionen der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums* (Religions of Reason from the Sources of Judaism, 1919) also influenced Fromm and his humanistic interpretation of religion (cf. Pinkas 2024). This did not change when Fromm gave up his own Orthodox Jewish religious practice at the age of 26 and rejected all theistic forms of religion as idolatry (cf. Funk 2000, p. 61).

From this point onwards, Fromm always dealt with humanistic and often mystical currents in religions from a critical perspective (cf. Hardeck 1992; Braune 2014; Byrd 2024). His interest in Jewish humanism remained unbroken until the end of his life. Thus, the verse Leviticus 19:33, “Love the stranger, for you have been strangers in Egypt and hence you know the soul of the stranger,“ meant to Fromm: “Only if one has experienced that which the stranger experiences, if one can put oneself in his place, one can understand him, or to put it more broadly, only if one can experience what any other human being experiences can one understand him, can one know what he feels.” (Fromm 1992m, p. 63.)

At the age of sixty-six, forty years after his departure from practicing Judaism, Fromm published a book with the subtitle: “A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and Its Tradition.” The term “radical” refers to a humanistic interpretation, which is already echoed in the book’s title, “You Shall Be as Gods.” For this is the serpent’s promise in paradise: Man may not be God himself through an act of disobedience, but he can achieve the realization of his humanity. Fromm himself calls his interpretation of the Bible in this book radically humanistic. He understands it as “a global philosophy which emphasizes the oneness of the human race, the capacity of man to develop his own powers and to arrive at inner harmony and at the establishment of a peaceful world” (Fromm 1966a, p. 13).

The fact that the act of disobedience is what enables the development of human potential is a legitimate Jewish interpretation for Fromm. Above all, it contradicts a Christian view of humanity that has developed since Augustine in the 4th century. For Augustine, the act of disobedience results in original sin, with which evil and the corruptness of man came into the world. It can only be overcome through

a supernatural act of salvation (cf. Fromm 1947a, p. 211).

This is the beginning of a development in which humanism and religion become opponents: With humanism, humans have it in their own hands to develop into full human beings; with religion, humans must first be enabled to do so by the mercy of God. At the end of the Middle Ages and in the transition to modernity, this development is reflected in two different concepts of individuality. In the Reformation concept, the individual can enter into a relationship with God without the mediation of the church, but only in dependence on God's mercy. The Renaissance, on the other hand, sees the individual as the bearer of "humanitas" and attributes dignity and the potency for perfection to the individual (cf. Fromm 1963f, pp. 72-74).

Renaissance and Enlightenment philosophy

"The most fundamental thought of humanism is the idea that humanity *(humanitas)* is not an abstraction but a reality: that in each individual all of humanity is contained." (Fromm 1963f, p. 70.) This idea, which Fromm already recognized in occidental religions and ancient philosophy (cf. Fromm 1966a, pp. 82-86), was pursued further in the Renaissance, especially by Nicholas of Cusa (Cusanus). At the same time, humanists such as Gianozzo Manetti, Pico della Mirandola, and Erasmus of Rotterdam emphasized the *dignity* of man and thus liberated humanism from ecclesiastical paternalism and the Augustinian concept of man. Along with the dignity of man, one's capacity for goodness and (individual) freedom is also emphasized (cf. Fromm 1963f, pp. 72f.).

In addition to the idea that humanity is represented in every single person, Renaissance humanism also develops the idea that people can achieve perfection on the basis and through the practice of their own powers. For Fromm, "with this impetus of Renaissance thinking on the potentialities of man which must be realized, (begins) a new kind of humanist thinking" (Fromm 1966a, p. 20), which ties in with the virtue ethics tradition since Aristotle. The extent to which the question of developing human potential determines the thinking of modernity can be seen, among other things, in the fact that the question of upbringing and education is becoming increasingly important and that psychology and sociology are developing into independent disciplines.

A whole series of ideas and thinkers from the modern era played a special role in Fromm's own humanism. First and foremost are the philosophers of the 18th century, who developed a general concept of "the essence of man" by distinguishing

"between human nature as we find it in general, and the specific form in which human nature is expressed in each society and each culture. (…) We can infer from the many manifestations of man in various cultures and in various individuals what that is which man has in common: what that is which is specifically human." (Fromm 1992m, p. 67.) (As will be shown later, Fromm himself recognizes in the questions of human beings, more precisely in the existential psychic needs for relatedness, that which is all human beings common).

Fromm sees the idea "that man carries in himself not only his own individuality but all humanity with all its potentialities" as being especially realized in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's thought and work, particularly in Goethe's drama *Iphigenia in Tauris*. "The goal of life, to Goethe, was to develop through individuality to universality." (Ibid., p. 68.) A similar appreciation to that of Goethe is given to the humanistic thinking of Karl Marx, as most notably expressed in his early writings (excerpts of which Fromm made available to English-speaking readers for the first time in 1961 with his book *Marx's Concept of Man*).

The roots of Erich Fromm's humanistic thinking, which have been mentioned more as examples, are primarily related to the history of ideas. Fromm's understanding of humanism, however, includes that the oneness of human beings is not only thought but "experienced alive" (Fromm 1992m, p. 76). In psychological terms, experience is not just about sensory and cognitive perception but also about feelings and conscious and unconscious ways of being experienced. Thus, for Fromm, Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis opens up a further dimension of humanism that remains barely considered in the philosophy of humanism. (On Fromm's influence on humanistic psychology, see especially Johach 2015; 2016).

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis

Sigmund Freud was not the first to observe that our behavior can be determined by unconscious impulses. Baruch de Spinoza was already aware that unconscious irrational passions determine our thoughts and feelings. Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy also takes the unconscious into account. However, Freud was "first to have made this discovery the center of his psychological system" (Fromm 1979a, p. 23). Therefore, he regarded what we think with great skepticism.

This skepticism mainly concerns the difference between what someone thinks and says and what someone (unconsciously) strives for and feels.

"If somebody says >I love you< or >I love God< or >I love my country,< he

> utters words which, in spite of the fact that he fully believes in their truth, may be utterly untrue and nothing but a rationalization of the person's wish for power, success, fame, money or an expression of his own dependence on his group. There might not be—and usually there is not—any element of love involved." (Ibid., p. 24.)

For two reasons, in particular, Freud stands in the tradition of Enlightenment humanism. Since Freud sees the unconscious primarily as instinctual wishes ("id") and as an accumulation of repressed impulses that lead to irrational behavior and psychic states of suffering, it is important to use (therapeutic) approaches to the repressed to dissolve their irrational dynamics and energy by making them conscious ("reason"). Although Freud was interested in the question of how irrational behavior comes about, he regarded the solution as enlightenment through reason: "According to the basic principle of Freud's therapy, he who understands that which is unconscious, frees himself in this very process and can overcome his symptom." (Fromm 1962a, p. 26.)

The other reason why Fromm assigns Freud's psychoanalysis to the humanism of the Enlightenment has to do with the "model of a human nature" that Freud developed. Freud takes as his starting point a human being as such: "someone about whose structure generally valid and empirical statements can be made" (Fromm 1970d, p. 30). Yet Freud's "model of the human nature" is based on a theory that does little justice to the cultural and social differences between people. For Freud, all human psychic manifestations stem from physiologically rooted self-preservation and sexual drives and their intrinsic dynamics. In doing so, he takes the ideas of his own patriarchally organized and largely sexuality-hostile bourgeois society as his starting point and considers the instinctual destinies and differentiations observable in it to be natural and, therefore, characteristics of the universal human being. (Freud's second drive theory, which deals with conflicts between life instincts (Eros) and death instincts, does not fundamentally change the idea that all people are controlled by the same instinctual dynamics. – Cf. ibid., p. 33).

2. Erich Fromm's humanistic psychology

Erich Fromm received his doctorate at the age of twenty-two under the sociologist Alfred Weber in Heidelberg and subsequently underwent training as a psychoanalyst, finishing in Berlin in 1930. Throughout his life, he was primarily interested in the irrational behavior of social groups and the question of how the

economic, social, political, and cultural requirements of coexisting impact the behavior of social groups. He was initially convinced that in many individuals, a psychic structure formation must occur in which the requirements of life practice only have a *modifying* influence on the demands of the drives (cf. Fromm 1932a). However, the moving force of psychic formations and their manifestations are the demands of the drives, as defined more precisely by Freud in his libido theory.

The reception of the findings of Johann Jakob Bachofen and Robert Briffault on matricentric and patricentric cultures, as well as cross-cultural studies (for example, by Ruth Benedict and Margarete Mead), led Fromm to ask more and more questions in the early 1930s about whether Freudian drive theory is the right explanatory framework for understanding the different forms of interaction and self-experience of people in other cultures, especially since important drive conflict constellations such as the Oedipus complex cannot be proven in some cultures. Impressed by the theories developed by the American psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan, in the winter of 1936/37, Fromm finally developed his own understanding of psychoanalysis following a relational paradigm (Fromm 1992e [1937]).

Universal psychic needs for relatedness

Erich Fromm takes the neuronal development of the human species as his starting point. This is characterized by reduced genetic-instinctive control and, at the same time, by the ability to generate completely different and independent responses to coexistence and self-experience with the help of reason and imagination. The “essence” of man, i.e., what makes a being human, is therefore understood by Fromm as a contradiction: “These contradictions create conflict and fright, a dis-equilibrium which man must try to solve in order to achieve a better equilibrium” (Fromm 1968a, p. 8f.).

The fears relate primarily to one’s psychic survival as soon as being related is no longer instinctively secured. For Fromm, then, there is no more threatening fear than to experience oneself as unrelated, isolated, or ostracized (cf. Fromm 1962a, p. 126). According to all psychiatric experience, it is the person themselves who must ensure that they can relate to reality, to other people, to a social group, and to themselves. Any deficit in the instinctive assurance of relatedness, therefore, generates specific human needs for relatedness, which must be satisfied in the same way as the physical needs to eat, drink, sleep, etc.

Fromm calls these needs, which arise from the existential situation of the human

species, "existential needs" (described in detail in Fromm 1955a, pp. 22-66). In the meantime, empirical attachment research since John Bowlby, but also the field of neurobiology, has confirmed that life is only neuronally possible on the basis of relatedness — see, for example, Fuchs 2018. How these needs are satisfied in detail depends on the specific historical circumstances and requirements. Repeatedly practiced forms of satisfaction become habitual and then determine the typical behavior of a person or social group as character strivings. For Fromm, character formations, therefore, represent a substitute for instinctual control in terms of their function. Regarding the forms of satisfaction, everything that humans are capable of is basically possible; regarding their genesis in individuals and groups, character formation does not depend on instinctual desires but on repeated experiences of relatedness (cf. Funk 2022).

Fromm's paradigm shift from a libido-theoretical to a relatedness-theoretical explanatory framework of psychic manifestations (cf. Funk 2013) enables Fromm to use existential needs to justify the universality of the human being. "The questions, not the answers, are man's >essence<" (Fromm 1968g, p. 9.). As manifold, creative, helpful, and healing or alienating, disease-causing, contradictory, and alienating as the answers may be, what unites people are the shared human needs for relatedness. (For the impact of Fromm's approach on the social sciences, see Durkin 2014; Durkin & Braune 2020; Thompson 2024).

The existential needs for relatedness common to all people are not the only universal aspects of being human for Fromm. Fromm himself describes other existential needs, such as the need for transcendence (Fromm 1955a, pp. 36-38) and the need for effectiveness (Fromm 1973a, pp. 235-237), which are only referred to here (cf. Cortina 2024). Beyond existential needs, there is another universal characteristic of every human being, according to Fromm: the tendency to realize one's own potential for growth.

The tendency towards a humanly productive development

The human capacity to become fully developed plays a central role in Fromm's understanding of humanism. According to Fromm, it is characteristic of prophetic messianism and a hallmark of Renaissance humanism. From a psychological perspective, Fromm understands the striving for human perfection as an intrinsic motivation to develop one's own potential. Fromm described such an urge in the formation of psychic structures and character strivings with the term "productive orientation." In concrete terms, every human being strives inwardly to develop

the abilities of reason, love, solidarity, freedom, creativity, etc., that are possible for them.

While Fromm initially explained this productive orientation in terms of the dynamics of organisms (Fromm 1947a, pp. 217f.), in the 1960s, he linked his concept of productive orientation with the theory of biophilia developed by biologists (Fromm 1964a, pp. 45-48). Every life is characterized by a love for life and strives to develop the possibilities inherent in their respective form of life. This also applies, in principle, to the mental abilities of humans to shape their relationships in a loving and reasonable way.

Due to the capacity for imagination, however, biophilic orientation is not a natural necessity in humans as it is in their animal ancestors. Because humans can make themselves and others the object of interest and can also allow contrary strivings to have an effect in shaping this interest, biophilia is only a *primary tendency* in humans. It can be impeded and then lead to inhibitions, neurotic symptoms, and deficits in the development of mental and social capabilities. It can also be completely blocked and thwarted, resulting in a counterproductive and necrophilic dynamic (aimed at destruction and annihilation). (cf. Fromm 1941a, pp. 180-185; Rudnytsky 2019)

The theory of the primary tendency to biophilia, which Fromm first presented in the book *The Heart of Man* (Fromm 1964a, pp. 45-48; cf. 1967e) and then substantiated with neuroscientific findings in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (Fromm 1973a, pp. 253-258), is of decisive importance for a scientific foundation of humanism. Though Fromm was always convinced that "*destructiveness is the outcome of unlived life*" (Fromm 1941a, p. 184; 1947a, p. 216), with the concept of biophilia, he also attempted to understand in human biological terms the emergence of specific forms of human destructiveness — traditionally understood as "evil" — as a thwarting of the primary biophilic tendency.

Fromm's theory of a primary tendency towards the productive and biophilic realization of human growth potential has a whole series of consequences. Thus, the initial phylogenetic and ontogenetic situation for humans is not a corrupted and guilt-ridden one: Neither was the prehistoric person an aggressive primal horde being (but, as has now been scientifically proven in many ways, a solidary and cooperative being) nor is the newborn a completely self-sufficient, narcissistic being (but a being dependent on sociality and striving for sociality from the very first breath, even if the cognitive and emotional prerequisites for differentiated sociality are still being formed).

Above all, however, evil is not innate in humans, and there is no equal origin of the life and death instincts, as Freud assumed in his revised drive theory. Rather, destructiveness is the result of unlived life, so it is the responsibility of humans to decide which dynamics they promote. For Fromm, therefore, the Holocaust does not mean the end of humanist utopias (as is the case for Adorno).

Yet, sixty-five years ago, Fromm was already highly alarmed by the possibility that it would no longer be humans who control technology but computer technology that controls humans and that the principle of the "perfection of humans" could be replaced by the principle of the "perfection of things" (cf. Fromm 1960a, p. 79; Johach 2018; Kühn 2019; Frindte 2022). In his book *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (Fromm 1973, pp. 349-358), Fromm spoke of the "cybernetic man" — borrowing a term from Norbert Wiener (Wiener 1950) — meaning exactly what is meant today by the human dependent on artificial intelligence (cf. Lankau 2025).

The need for sociality and social identity

Fromm's humanistic and scientific thinking is based on existential psychic needs that are common to all people and a primary tendency to satisfy these needs in a biophilic and growth-promoting way. Such theorizing only became possible when Fromm explained the psychic motivational forces not from innate drives but from the necessity of human relatedness. Thus, the psychic motivational forces are not only formed according to the experiences of relatedness through the primary caregivers but also through the requirements of social interaction, which already leads to the internalization of and identification with social expectations in the young child through the family as the "agency of society" (Fromm 1932a, p. 35). After renouncing libido theory, Fromm, therefore, no longer speaks of the "libidinal structure" of the individual and society but of the individual and social character as the motivating inner structure formation.

The "decoupling" of character formation from instincts and the assumption of a separate psychic structure formation, in which the socio-economic requirements of togetherness are internalized and perceptible as one's own strivings, enables Fromm to define a *new relationship between the individual and society*. For him, "society is nothing but living, concrete individuals, and the individual can live only as a social human being" (Fromm 1992e, p. 58). Culture and society are no longer opposed to the individual with his instinctual demands. Above all, however, sociality is not a hard-earned result of renouncing instincts. Rather, the individual

feels within himself, to a greater or lesser extent, the contradictions between what his social character strives for and what corresponds to his productive and biophilic orientation.

If it is not instincts but psychic needs for relatedness that are the driving force behind the formation of psychic structures and the resulting behavior, then humans have always been social beings. This is why Fromm speaks of an "existential need for rootedness" (Fromm 1955a, pp. 38-60). This is experienced as a striving for social identity and the need to belong to a social group. As with all existential satisfaction of needs, the productive and biophilic quality is reflected in the fact that one's own mental and social powers are promoted.

The more differentiated and, at the same time, the more appreciative the perception of the other is in accordance with and in differentiation from one's own, the more biophilic the social experience of identity and the less contradictory sociality and individuality are. However, the reverse is also true: the more only one's own is seen and idealized, while the other, the foreign and the non-own, is devalued, kept at a distance, or even fought against, the more destructive the coexistence of the universal human being in a globalized One World becomes.

Against this backdrop, the right-wing populist movements with their narcissistic fantasies of grandeur in the form of nationalism ("America First" and "Make America Great Again", "Germany to the Germans", "Brexit", etc.) are anything but indications of a humanistic policy and a humanization of the economy and society. This is why Fromm warned as early as 1962:

> "Unless man learns to live as *one* man, a part of *one* world, this nationalism will cause conditions and situations in which he is in danger of destroying himself. Unless we develop a new humanism, there will *be* no *one* world." (Fromm 1992m, p. 62.)

So far, the roots of Erich Fromm's humanistic thinking and the extent to which his psychological approach provides a scientific foundation for humanistic thinking and develops it further have been outlined. The following section will focus on Fromm's understanding of the unconscious, as this represents a crucial additional development of the psychology of humanism and the concept of the universal human being.

3. Erich Fromm's concept of the unconscious

As mentioned above, Freud connects the unconscious with the libidinal "id" and

the repressed libidinal drives, which are mostly of a sexual nature. According to Fromm, humans are not only moved by existential needs but also by the primary tendency to optimize their development potential as human beings. This productive orientation is what Erich Fromm sees represented in the humanistic conscience, which he speaks of in the book *Man for Himself* (Fromm 1947a, pp. 141-172).

The humanistic conscience and its representation

If, for Freud, the conscience (super-ego) is "the internalized voice of an authority whom we are eager to please and afraid of displeasing", Fromm understands the phenomenon of the inner voice more comprehensively as a more or less conscious

> "own voice, present in every human being and independent of external sanctions and rewards. (…) Humanistic conscience is the reaction of our total personality to its proper functioning or dysfunctioning; not a reaction to the functioning of this or that capacity but to the totality of capacities which constitute our human and our individual existence." (Fromm 1947a, p. 158.)

Obviously, the voice of conscience refers to the question of how far man's primary tendency towards productive or biophilic development (one's "true self", as he says in the following quote) is actually realized or whether it is impeded or thwarted:

> "*Conscience is thus a re-action of ourselves to ourselves*. It is the voice of our true selves which summons us back to ourselves, to live productively, to develop fully and harmoniously—that is, to become *what we potentially are*." (Ibid., p. 159.)

The humanistic conscience is, therefore, the guardian of our *human* interests, namely, to develop our biophilic powers. Even if the term "conscience" linguistically only refers to cognitive co-knowledge (con-scientia), it has an affective quality, "for it is the reaction of our total personality and not only the reaction of our mind. In fact, we need not be aware of what our conscience says in order to be influenced by it." (Ibid., pp. 158f.)

The extent to which we are aware of the voice of the humanist conscience depends on the strength of the productive orientation: "The more productively one lives, the stronger is one's conscience, and, in turn, the more it furthers one's productiveness. The less productively one lives, the weaker becomes one's

conscience." (Ibid., p. 160.)

The "silence" of conscience just when it should be heard is tragic, but it also corresponds to the impression we get when we say that people act "without conscience". And yet, there is an everyday situation in which conscience can express itself loudly and unmistakably, namely when a person is asleep and dreaming. "Sleep is often the only occasion in which man cannot silence his conscience." (Ibid., p. 164.)

The idea that the voice of the humanist conscience must also be repressed for social reasons and, therefore, only emerges through expressions of the unconscious — such as in dreams — was developed by Fromm a few years later in the book *The Forgotten Language: An Introduction to the Understanding of Dreams, Fairy Tales and Myths*. Obviously, we are not only less rational and decent in our dreams, as Freud assumed, "but also more intelligent, wiser, and capable of better judgment (...) than in the waking state" (Fromm 1951a, p. 33). In dreams, we know much more about others and ourselves than we are aware of in waking life (cf. Fromm 1972a, p. 9).

> "This, then, is the conclusion at which we arrive: the state of sleep has an ambiguous function. In it the lack of contact with culture makes for the appearance both of our worst and of our best; therefore, if we dream, we may be less intelligent, less wise, and less decent, but we may also be better and wiser than in our waking life." (Fromm 1951a, p. 36.)

Based on several dream examples (ibid. pp. 36-46), Fromm makes it clear that dreams often not only enable a better, unvarnished perception of oneself and other people but sometimes even reveal intellectual realizations and deeper insights into problems.

Fromm thus arrives at a completely different appreciation of the unconscious than Freud: In sleep, "we become awake to what we really feel and think. The genuine self can talk; it is often more intelligent and more decent than the pseudo self which seems to be >we< when we are awake." (Fromm 1949a, p. 46.)

Towards a new understanding of the unconscious

Among the paths to the unconscious recognized by Freud, the dream and understanding the "language" of the dream is also the most important path to the unconscious for Fromm. The experience of reality in dreams reveals how to understand what we call "unconscious".

In fact, the language of dreams (as well as myths and fairy tales) is a symbolic language with which "inner experiences are expressed as if they were sensory experiences, subjective states as if they were actions dealing with external reality" (Fromm 1949a, p. 45). Furthermore, the categories of *space and time* do not apply in dreams, nor do the laws of *logic* that govern our waking life. It is also characteristic of dreams that events and people appear that we would otherwise never think of or remember. "In our sleeping life, we seem to tap the vast store of experience and memory which in the daytime we do not know exists." (Fromm 1951a, p. 5.)

In order to understand dreams, one must engage with these peculiarities of language and logic. The *paradoxical logic* of what we are not aware of means that the opposite is also present without contradiction. The laws of logic formulated by Aristotle generally apply to the logic of consciousness, for example, that love cannot simultaneously be hate. What sometimes becomes apparent on closer analysis of a person's feelings, namely that someone feels both love and hate towards the same person, applies regularly, so to speak, to what we are not aware of. Unconsciously, we are everything, even the contrary. In fact, there are approaches to such a paradoxical logic of the unconscious not only through the analysis of ambivalent feelings but also in Far Eastern philosophy or in the description of religious experiences of God (cf. Fromm 1956a, pp. 72-82.).

It was Fromm's intensive study of Zen Buddhism and, in particular, a joint seminar with Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki on "Psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism" in the summer of 1957 in Cuernavaca, Mexico (cf. Fromm 1960a) that decisively contributed to his understanding of the unconscious as the universal human being with all facets of human possibilities. If one assumes that the unconscious "always represents the whole man, with all his potentialities for darkness and light" (Fromm 1963f, p. 76), then consciousness only represents those small sections "which our language, our logic, and the taboos of our societies permit us to be aware. There is, you might say, something like a >social filter<, and only those experiences that can pass through that social filter are the things we are aware of; they are our consciousness." (Fromm 1992m, p. 77.)

The significance of *socially conditioned filters* can be illustrated by the behavior of rather peace-loving or aggressive ethnic groups as well as by current social character formations (cf. Fromm 1962a, pp. 121-123). "Man, in any culture, has all the potentialities within himself; he is the archaic man, the beast of prey, the cannibal, the idolater, and he is the being with a capacity for reason, for love, for

justice." (Ibid., p. 128.) This also means, however, that what we are not aware of is "neither the good nor the evil". What we are not aware of is both; it is all that is human. "*The unconscious is the whole man—minus that part of him which corresponds to his society.*" (Ibid.)

Erich Fromm's different view of consciousness and the unconscious outlined here has far-reaching consequences, the first of which concerns social consciousness.

4. Social consciousness and its critique

The theory that socially conditioned filters only allow a certain, namely, socially accepted way of thinking, feeling, and acting does not mean that there is not a wide spectrum of different, socially accepted ways of thinking, feeling, and acting — depending on how closed ("collectively") or open ("individualized") social systems of coexistence are organized. It is to Erich Fromm's scientific achievement that, with the concept of social character, he identified the psychic structure formation in many people that makes them *want* to think, feel, and act in the way they are *required* to think, feel, and act for the functionality of socio-economic and political-cultural conditions.

The more dominating a social character orientation is in a social grouping or even in entire societies and cultures, the more imperative the question becomes from a humanistic perspective as to whether the dominant social character has a productive and biophilic or a non-productive and alienating effect on self-experience and coexistence. Such a quality of psychic impulses is neither recognizable in the consciousness of those affected nor in their pure behavioral expressions or in the spread of a social character (where the majority defines normality).

In addition, according to psychodynamic understanding, all character development serves to ensure that what people strive for in their behavior is experienced as "ego-syntonic". A compulsive character, for example, stands by this and will always find good reasons for playing it safe everywhere. Also, non-productive social character orientations, such as the authoritarian or narcissistic social character, will always perceive their striving for domination and submissiveness or their fantasies of grandiosity as reasonable, right, true, and normal.

In the humanistic perspective developed by Fromm, what and how most people think, feel, and act can also be a kind of madness of the average person (Fromm likes to speak of a "folie à million" in analogy to a delusional "folie à deux"). Therefore, what is considered normal and reasonable in a society can also be a

"pathology of normalcy" (Fromm 1944a; 1955a, pp. 12-21).

Fromm's theory of socially conditioned filters implies that social consciousness and what is considered socially normal and reasonable *must be critically questioned* with regard to its humanly productive or non-productive effects on the individual, on society, and on the natural conditions of life. In doing so, the psychodynamics of social character orientations analyzed by Fromm are an important help in recognizing the various non-productive strivings of social consciousness in social character formations and identifying the repressed human potentials (Funk 2019, pp. 95-143).

Such a "normative humanism" (Fromm 1955a, p. 12) must take its yardstick from the capacity for perfection, i.e. from the optimal psychosocial development of one's own cognitive, emotional, and imaginative powers (cf. Fromm 1966a, pp. 121f.). Only through permanent critical questioning of economic, social, cultural, political, social, and personal life practices can we determine the extent to which social consciousness represses the potential for humanity and reinforces humanly and socially non-productive striving.

If one focuses on the *social* unconscious, then the social character formations and socially conditioned filters prevent the realization of biophilic and productive growth potentials to the extent that these contradict the basic and partial strivings of non-productive social character orientations. However, children and adolescents show that many of the biophilic potentials in humans initially become conscious but are then increasingly weakened and repressed in the course of socialization. With an almost relentless urge and interest, they express not only their physical but also their cognitive, imaginative, and emotional powers and initially show a high degree of creativity and interest. Obviously, an upbringing and education system oriented towards the dominant social characters has alienating effects (cf. the contributions on biophilic pedagogy by Raidt 2025; Wehr 2025).

5. "The unconscious is the whole man"

The universal human being

The different understanding of consciousness and the unconscious enables a psychological foundation and expansion of humanism. If the unconscious is the whole and universal human being, then "we are in touch with humanity" when we are "in touch with our unconscious." Humanity here refers not only to the common questions and existential needs but also to the diversity and variety of

humanly productive and non-productive responses to the requirements of life and coexistence. To the extent that we seek and gain access to the totality of what is humanly possible, there is "no more stranger. Further, there is no more judging of others in the sense that we consider ourselves superior to them. If we are in touch with our unconscious, then, indeed, we experience ourselves as we experience everybody else." (Fromm 1992m, p. 78.)

> "The experience of my unconscious is the experience of my humanity, which makes it possible for me to say to every human being >I am thou.< I can understand you in all your basic qualities, in your goodness and in your evilness, and even in your craziness, precisely because all this is in me, too." (Fromm 1963f, p. 78.)

Getting in touch with one's own unconscious in order to gain access to previously unperceived and experienced fears, ideas, desires, conflicts, feelings, fantasies, etc., is a crucial component of strengthening one's own biophilic potential and overcoming the strangeness in dealing with others.

The discovery of the universal human being on a social level is most impressive when we become aware of the patriarchal dominance of men that has been practiced for thousands of years. The difficulty of overcoming this transcultural "filter" is demonstrated by the repeated failure of efforts to achieve equal rights for men and women. Other examples of becoming aware of socially conditioned filters are the movements for sexual and gender self-determination (cf. Romanetto 2024; Langer & O'Donnokoé 2024). The much-invoked "clash of cultures" shows how far humanity still is from being able to perceive the foreign as something of its own.

A very important personal method that Fromm used to access the unconscious was the daily practice of meditation, concentration, mindfulness, and, above all, self-analysis (cf. Fromm 1989a, pp. 31-86), for only when humanism is not only thought but experienced does it have transformative power. You have to experience for yourself what Terence tried to describe with the famous statement, "nothing human is alien to me" (Fromm 1992m, p. 77). "The mere idea of the universality of man (must be transformed) into the living experience of this universality; it is the experiential realization of humanity" (Fromm 1963f, p. 78).

It would be wrong, however, to conclude that it is only about self-analysis. In a kind of humanist credo, written in the mid-1960s, Fromm clarifies "that if an individual is not on the path to transcending his society and seeing in what way it

furthers or impedes the development of human potential, he cannot enter into intimate contact with his humanity." (Fromm 1992g, p. 103) According to Fromm, society, with its objectives and strivings, is present in every individual, meaning that changes within the individual, if they are to be effective and sustainable, always require an ability to criticize, which must lead to changes in those external structures and ways of relatedness that determine one's own self-experience and coexistence.

New perspectives of humanism in politics and psychotherapy

Fromm's concept of the unconscious opens up new perspectives both for the *idea* of humanism and its practical application in business, culture, society, and politics and for the humanistic *experience* in the art of living and psychotherapy.

With regard to the application of humanism by humanizing the economy and its modes of production, the organization of work, society, and — in view of the digital revolution — also technology, Fromm adopted ideas of communitarian socialism and designed models of a humanist socialism that have nothing in common with models of Marxism and actually existing socialism (cf. Fromm 1955a, ch. 8; 1960b; 1965a, pp. 207-221; 1968a, ch. 5).

As a particular threat to humanism, Fromm already recognized tribalism and nationalism in his book *The Heart of Man* (Fromm 1964a, pp. 78-94). He understands them as group narcissistic phenomena in which the self is idealized, and the other is devalued or attacked. In all forms of collective self-idealization, "we project all the evil in us on the stranger, and hence the result is that he is a devil and we are the angels. That is what we experience in all wars, what is experienced in fights between people in their personal lives, and that is what we have experienced on both sides in the Cold War, too." (Fromm 1992m, p. 78.) It has already been pointed out that "America First" and European right-wing populism are driven by precisely these dynamics. Fromm came to this conclusion as early as 1962: "I believe what man today *has* to choose, in a world that is becoming One World, is precisely Life – and that means a new experience of humanism. If he cannot choose that, he will not, I am afraid, manage the new >One World.<" (Ibid, p. 79.)

The different understanding of the unconscious also opens up new perspectives for *psychotherapeutic work*. Since — at least in therapies within one's own culture — most socially conditioned filters originate from social character orientations, the question of becoming aware of one's own social character is a crucial

issue for both therapists and patients. However, since Fromm himself published very little on questions of the therapeutic setting, therapeutic work and relationship, and therapeutic training, this question cannot simply be answered with his publications. References to this can be found primarily in his posthumous writing *The Art of Listening* (Fromm 1991a) and in an anthology of memoirs by his students (Funk 2009; see also Krassoievitch 2007 and Funk 2024).

With regard to the effects of this other understanding on the therapeutic relationship, Fromm gave three lectures at the William Alanson White Institute in 1959 under the overall title "Theory of Psychoanalysis". The lectures deal with the holistic understanding of the unconscious, alienation as a special form of the unconscious, and the implications of understanding the unconscious for the therapeutic relationship. They were only published posthumously under the title "Dealing with the Unconscious in Psychotherapeutic Practice" (Fromm 1992g [1959]).

In terms of the implications for the therapeutic relationship, it immediately becomes clear that Fromm is concerned with a "direct encounter" (Funk 2019, pp. 1-17), which is characterized by a deep sense of solidarity: The feeling of human solidarity "is one of the most important therapeutic experiences which we can give to the patient, because at that moment the patient does not feel isolated anymore." (Fromm 1992g, p. 107.)]

The direct encounter aims to come into contact with the feelings and passions of the other person in order to be able to experience them holistically in this way. Fromm has a clear feature for this type of direct encounter: "If you really see a person (…) you stop judging provided you see that person fully. (…) I have a sense of union, of sharing, of oneness" which makes me feel: "So that is you, and I share this with you." (Ibid., p. 106f.) It is obvious that a therapeutic relationship as a "direct encounter" is only possible face to face and not as a participating observer behind the couch.

Fromm emphasizes something else regarding the socially conditioned filters of therapists: The way they relate to patients cannot be separated from their other relationships and their sense of reality. Those whose relationships with their spouse, children, and acquaintances are determined by socially conditioned filters are also determined by these filters when dealing with patients and their unconscious. If we really want to understand the unconscious, "which the social filter does not permit to come into awareness, then indeed we have to transcend the frame of reference of our society" (ibid., pp. 110f.].

Even more important is the critical handling of one's own social filters when treating patients from other societies and cultures: Here, "it is very necessary to understand other societies and other cultures, from the primitive ones to the civilized ones—to understand and see simply other possibilities of structures and experiences, which for them were conscious but which for us are unconscious" (ibid., p. 111).

Fromm's prophetic-messianic key idea for a universal humanism, which was mentioned at the beginning, takes on a further meaning with the different understanding of the unconscious: When Isaiah says: "nation shall not lift sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Is 2,4) and that all nations will be friends because "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Is 11,9), then the idea that the land is filled with the "knowledge of the Lord" like the sea is filled with water can also be understood as a symbolic expression of Fromm's extended humanism. The unconscious (the depth of the sea) is to be understood as man's knowledge of his universal human potential, which is no longer kept away (by "social filters") from becoming conscious and therefore symbolizes the "knowledge of the Lord" that fills the land so that the most diverse people experience themselves less and less alien and hostile.

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