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## **The Symbolic Language of the Unconscious: Erich Fromm's Studies on the Human Being**

**Abstract:** This text aims at a multi-dimensional reflection on Erich Fromm's conception of the human being. Starting from Marxist-Freudian sources of the philosopher's thought, the authors show the fundamental ideas underlying his version of psychoanalysis. Next, Fromm's view of the human being as a social being is discussed, referring to the concepts of unproductive and productive orientations. Another important dimension of Fromm's thought that is discussed is the reflection on the nature and functions of the symbolic language of the unconscious, which reveals to the human being both the best and the worst aspects of his or her personality. One of the most famous concepts of the American philosopher is also discussed — the distinction between the being mode and the having mode. The authors draw attention to the value Fromm placed on a life oriented towards the being mode. Finally, they remind us, following Fromm, that a human being turns towards himself in his or her dreams, going beyond all the schemes and concepts that bind his mind when he or she is awake. The understanding of oneself that comes from a deep reflection on the content and character of a dream can awaken in a person the recognition of previously unknown dimensions of his or her mind; from now on, he is not merely someone immersed in the reality of everyday life. Crossing the horizon of oneiric imagination, he or she becomes free, in the dream, and she experiences the freedom of being on waking.

**Keywords:** Fromm, Freud, Marx, symbol, unconscious, symbolic language

Psychoanalysis emerged at the turn of the 19th century as a medical science and as a response to the ineffectiveness of the medicine of that time in relation to problems connected with the aetiology and the treatment of neuroses. With time, however, as research in the field of neuropharmacology progressed, its therapeutic dimension gradually lost its significance; and Sigmund Freud himself, as Francis Fukuyama<sup>1</sup> notes, began to be perceived more as a philosopher than a scientist. The founder of psychoanalysis, by formulating general laws concerning the psychological development of an individual, based on his or her biological needs and influenced by social relations, revived the dispute concerning the nature of humanity. Many schools of thought have emerged whose representatives have directly referred to Freud's views, revising or rejecting them. In this paper we interpret Erich Fromm as Freud's intellectual heir rather than his adversary. Despite breaking with some of the postulates of classical psychoanalysis, he filled in some important gaps in Freud's perception of humans. Following especially Karl Marx's early views, he emphasized the social dimension of the human being and created a synthesis of the views of both thinkers, giving rise to a new concept of humankind.

## Predecessors: Freud and Marx

Fromm described his philosophy as a synthesis of the views of two great predecessors: Marx and Freud.<sup>2</sup> It was in the works of both thinkers that he found satisfactory answers to the questions bothering him about human being, perceived in both the individual and the social dimensions.<sup>3</sup> He valued Marx more, mainly for his innovative reinterpretation of German idealism, which, combined with the reality of empirical facts, initiated a new science of human being and society, ultimately leading to a deep and comprehensive approach to socio-economic phenomena.

Marx and Freud are characterized by a materialistic attitude. For the first of them, the primary reality is the empirical one, which consists of concrete people, their activities, and the material conditions in which they live.<sup>4</sup> On this ground, all kinds of ideologies that define social consciousness arise. They can reflect the actual state of affairs, or, as is common, be some form of its distortion. According to Marx, it is the ideology prevailing in a given society that largely determines the way of thinking of its representatives. He called the distorted image of reality behind the veil of illusions and ideology "false consciousness."

Although such an attitude often helps to endure the hardships of broadly understood existence, it ultimately causes the degradation of human being, leading to his or her alienation. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel had already written about this phenomenon, but the Marxist theory of alienation is an extension of the

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<sup>1</sup> F. Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*, New York 2002, p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> E. Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion: My Encounter with Marx and Freud*, New York 2009, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>4</sup> K. Marx, F. Engels, "The German Ideology," transl. W. Lough, [in:] K. Marx, F. Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5, Moscow 1976, p. 31.

concept found in Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach. Alienation occurs when a human individual takes some of his or her innate dispositions beyond himself, assigning them to external objects or abstract concepts. For this reason, the human becomes poorer as an individual and at the same time becomes dependent on those objects or concepts. Feuerbach sees Christianity in this way — as the disuniting of humankind from itself.<sup>5</sup> Religion strips the human being of positive qualities such as good and then identifies them with God. In this way, human nature is deprived of noble motives; it becomes evil. In turn, God, being the depository of all that is good, gains autonomy, and as an idea, begins to dominate over humankind. Another form of alienation to which Marx devotes much attention, especially in his early writings, is alienated work. The activity of transforming nature in order to gradually liberate oneself from dependence on environmental conditions, leading to an improvement in the quality of life — is an innate feature of the human species. However, today's social system has led to estranged labour.<sup>6</sup> Work no longer serves man, but man serves work. It has become an abstract concept, detached from the individual — the fetish for which individuals are striving. Thus, one can see a close relationship between the mental condition and the ideology prevailing in society. Only ideas based on an undistorted reflection of real social conditions can again lead to the internal integration of the individual and the further development of society.

The Marxist conception of a human being sees two dimensions in them. First, they are biological creatures that must survive.<sup>7</sup> For this, they need food, clothing, and shelter. Second, humans are social beings in the sense that, to quote Adam Schaff, “he [sic!] is born in a specific society, in certain conditions and social relations, which he does not choose, but which are given as a result of the activities of previous generations.”<sup>8</sup> In this way, his or her awareness is shaped by the social awareness of the group. On the other hand, society is made up of specific people who enter into specific relationships with each other. Thus, also individuals — through their activities' shaping material conditions — indirectly influence social consciousness. On the other hand, society is made up of specific people who enter into specific relationships with each other. Thus, also individuals, through their activities' shaping material conditions, indirectly influence social consciousness. Humankind does not have an ahistoric, unchanging nature; living in a specific place and time, human beings are shaped by the society to which they belong. Marx's concept of social development is dialectical; it is based mainly on the struggle of contradictory forces representing the dynamism of social groups. The main driving force behind the development of the current society is the antagonism between the contradictory aspirations of a small, wealthy group with power and the subordinate majority. Such an approach to history — called by Marx “the his-

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<sup>5</sup> L. Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, transl. G. Eliot, San Antonio 2008, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> K. Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” transl. M. Milligan, D. Struik, [in:] K. Marx, F. Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 3, Moscow 1975, p. 270.

<sup>7</sup> K. Marx, F. Engels, “The German Ideology,” pp. 41–42.

<sup>8</sup> A. Schaff, *Marksizm a jednostka ludzka*, Warszawa 1965, p. 39 (transl. A.K., M.S.).

tory of class struggles<sup>9</sup> — makes it possible to understand the past, and to some extent, on the basis of the present socio-economic situation, to predict the further development of society.

While Marx sees humankind primarily as beings shaped by society, for Freud they are primarily biological beings guided by drives. These are stimuli that reach the mental apparatus and represent the needs of the body.<sup>10</sup> They are characterized by energy, which is a measure of their intensity, and images of objects with which they can be satisfied. Freud called the infantile drives “this” in general, and the activity seeking to satisfy them “the pleasure principle.” However, the outside world has its own rules. In order to survive, an individual must coexist with other people and be able to find himself in the environment in which he or she lives; this is the “principle of reality.” In addition, humankind also has moral principles that arose mainly as a result of a positive solution to the Oedipus complex and under the influence of authorities. In this way, the individual formed the image of the “ideal self,” which Freud called “over-me.” Thus, human existence is entangled in antagonisms. Humans, as social beings, must find a compromise between satisfying the drives, the demands of the external world, and ingrained moral principles. An important novelty in Freudian thought is the introduction of the concept of the unconscious, in which all ideas related to drives arise. However, due to censorship, some of them do not reach the conscious part of the mental apparatus. The drive does not cease until its energy is discharged through satisfaction — therefore, in place of the repressed images, so-called substitute images appear. As a result, the individual directs his or her own action towards activities perceived as pathological — for example, compulsive handwashing, or towards a more noble activity, approved by society, such as artistic creation or charity. This view undermines the basic idea of the Cartesian postulate of self-knowledge, which is based on the assumption that the knowing subject’s self-awareness is unquestionable in terms of its truthfulness. According to this assumption, one can doubt the judgments concerning the outside world — but not the truthfulness of one’s own thoughts — directly experienced, constituting the self. By introducing the concept of the unconscious into clinical practice, Freud showed that there are antagonisms between the “conscious self” and the “real self.” However, it is not only images that have been repressed or distorted under the influence of censorship that contribute to a false self-perception. Research on hypnosis — which Freud learned during his stay in Paris — shows that, under the right conditions, it is possible to incorporate psychic contents from the outside, which a person undergoing hypnosis may mistake for personal experience or the effects of his or her own thoughts. The concept of the unconscious is also associated with the concept of character, which is an individual disposition of each person. It results from early childhood experiences, mainly from the course and resolution of the Oedipus complex. As a result,

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<sup>9</sup> K. Marx, F. Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” transl. N.N., [in:] K. Marx, F. Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 6, Moscow 1976, p. 482.

<sup>10</sup> S. Freud, “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” transl. J. Strachey, [in:] *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, J. Strachey (ed.), vol. 14, London 1981, pp. 121–122.

mostly unconscious imagery structures are formed. Freud calls them figuratively “stereotype plate”<sup>11</sup> because they constitute a certain pattern according to which an individual enters into relationships with other people and also determines the area of his or her own interests. Fromm rightly notices that according to Freud, a human individual is mainly a being with autonomy;<sup>12</sup> guided by the principle of pleasure, he or she establishes relations with the opposite sex, which also benefits from it. In order to survive in the outside world, following the principle of reality, he or she is forced to suppress some of his urges from an early age. It is the fear of the father that drives out incestuous fantasies about the mother.<sup>13</sup> Later, other authorities appear — by instilling a specific value system — they positively influence the social adaptation of an individual, but at the cost of its authenticity — often at the expense of mental health. In Freud’s thought, there is a clear conflict between the individual and society.

The creator of psychoanalysis formulated his own concept of mind. Taking from Wilhelm Maximilian Wundt his theory of the organization of lived experiences, combined with each other into complex structures of imaginations, he was able to formulate a theory of complexes that determine the human perception of the world and constituted the measure of undertaken activities.

There are three areas in the psyche:<sup>14</sup> conscious, preconscious, and unconscious. Conscious is the term for the most immediate and unquestionable perception. The preconscious consists of images that can be brought to conscious without any major problems. On the other hand, all repressed experiences, especially concerning sexual development in early childhood, constitute the unconscious area. They can be discovered by using the so-called method of free associations, that is, the method based on associative jumps between related ideas that are close to the repressed content. However, the analysis of dreams, in which the unconscious is represented mainly by images that are its analogy (shift) or the summary and structure of fragments (compensation), is the basic cognitive method that Freud himself called “the royal road to the unconscious.”

The unconscious, however, is more than just a set of repressed images. It is also a source of innate knowledge, common to all people, which Freud calls outright: “unconscious pieces of knowledge.”<sup>15</sup> It is a permanent relationship, independent of individual experience and cultural differences, between latent elements and the

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<sup>11</sup> S. Freud, “The Dynamics of Transference,” transl. J. Strachey, [in:] *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, J. Strachey (ed.), vol. 12, London 1981, p. 100.

<sup>12</sup> E. Fromm, *Sigmund Freud’s Mission: An Analysis of His Personality and Influence*, New York 2013, p. 102.

<sup>13</sup> S. Freud, “The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex,” transl. J. Strachey, [in:] *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, J. Strachey (ed.), vol. 19, London 1986, p. 176.

<sup>14</sup> S. Freud, “The Ego and the Id,” transl. J. Strachey, [in:] *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, J. Strachey (ed.), vol. 19, London 1986, pp. 14–15.

<sup>15</sup> S. Freud, “Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis,” transl. J. Strachey, [in:] *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, J. Strachey (ed.), vol. 15, London 1981, p. 165.

symbols that represent them. They mainly relate to the most primal relationships,<sup>16</sup> mainly related to the body, parents, children, and nudity, as well as birth and death. For example, the house is the universal symbol of the body as a whole.

It is worth emphasizing the difference between the symbol generally understood and the concept used by Freud. Usually, a symbol is an object or image that relates to another object, often by convention. However, for the creator of psychoanalysis, the symbol is universal and unchanging; and it refers only to specific elements. On the other hand, representations of repressed content, resulting from individual experiences and distorted under the influence of censorship, Freud calls “substitute images,” or simply, “distortions.”

Based on these observations, we can attempt to define the concept of memory in Freud by distinguishing two aspects. One of them is discursive memory, related to pre-consciousness, shaped only under the influence of personal experiences and reflections. The second, on the other hand, is symbolic memory, unconscious, shaped by content repressed, resulting from individual experiences, related to universal knowledge — innate and proper to every human being.

Despite some significant differences, there are also many similarities in the views of Marx and Freud. They both went beyond pure materialism, adopting attitudes that could be described as psychologism. Although for Marx the basis is the perceived sensual world, social consciousness — although it grew out of the world of *physis* — constitutes a new quality that cannot be described in the natural sciences. Similarly, with Freud, the human body and its biological needs indeed constitute the basis and principle of all activity. However, Freud found all attempts to describe the psyche in the language of neurology unsuccessful<sup>17</sup> — clearly breaking away from physicalism. Another common feature of both thinkers is the dynamic and dialectical description of reality. The development of both society and humankind is guided by various, often conflicting forces. After all, Marx and Freud were critical. Both saw the discrepancy between the real and the prevailing ideological images of humankind and society. They criticized the prevailing opinions, reaching the truth — understood as a distortion-free image of reality — because it is truth that conditions a healthy human existence.

## Fromm’s Concept of Humankind

Fromm, like his intellectual predecessors, breaks with the naturalistic attitude. In his opinion, human existence cannot be reduced only to activities aimed at satisfying the needs related to the body. A human being also needs a system of views that constitute a frame of reference; are a touchstone of the activities undertaken by him or her; and above all, give meaning to life.<sup>18</sup> Fromm alludes to the Book of Genesis, in which he sees a metaphorical image of the real human condition. The acquisition of cognitive autonomy was paid for by severing the original bond with

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, p. 153.

<sup>17</sup> Z. Rosińska, *Freud*, Warszawa 2002, p. 39.

<sup>18</sup> E. Fromm, *The Pathology of Normalcy*, New York 2010, p. 25.

nature, which symbolizes exile from Paradise. Humans have not only distanced themselves from God but have also come into conflict with nature and other representatives of their own species. According to Fromm, God symbolizes the ideal of a fully realized human being: the Bible says that the human being was created in His image and likeness.<sup>19</sup> The individual, perceived to the full extent of his or her humanity, should actively work; live in relative harmony with society; and above all, fulfil himself in an individual dimension, in accordance with his or her innate dispositions. Being condemned to freedom, a person has to make his or her own decisions, choose the right ones from a potentially infinite number of objects and activities. For this he or she needs a specific “frame of orientation and devotion,”<sup>20</sup> which is one form of theistic or non-theistic religious attitude. Fromm has a clearly defined view of religiosity, so it is worth quoting his words: “any system of thought and action shared by a group which gives the individual a frame of orientation and an object of devotion.”<sup>21</sup> Religion understood in this way is not only a characteristic of human nature, a response to individual needs related to broadly understood existence. It is also an expression of a person’s mental condition; it defines people’s attitude towards themselves and the outside world. Thus, all mental disorders can be equated with a private form of religiosity. According to Fromm, many cases of neuroses can be described with the use of language borrowed from religious studies, as they are a manifestation of the primary forms of religiosity.<sup>22</sup> For example, the cult of a strong individual who heads a state or a particular social group is a special kind of totemism and idolatry. Obsessive-compulsive activities can also be perceived as a kind of private rituals related to the cult of purity. Of course not all religious attitudes are expressions of pathological personality; some of these holistic systems are signs of creativity and health.

A person’s uniqueness is evidenced by his or her personality; it consists of temperament and character. Temperament is unchanging, while character develops with the experience of the individual. It is constituted mainly during early childhood; however, due to self-analysis and new experiences, it may change.<sup>23</sup> Fromm agrees with Freud that character traits underlie human behaviour and are created by powerful forces that are often unconscious. However, unlike the creator of psychoanalysis, who associates character with a libidinal organization, Fromm focuses on the relationships that a person enters with the world through obtaining and assimilating things (assimilation) and bonding with people (socialization). Character is a substitute for instinct; it allows for spontaneous action without the need for constant reflection, and it also performs a selective function for ideas and values.<sup>24</sup> Fromm distinguishes four types of characters with non-productive orientations and

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<sup>19</sup> E. Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, New Haven 1955, p. 49.

<sup>20</sup> E. Fromm, *Man for Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*, Eastbourne 2006, pp. 47–48.

<sup>21</sup> E. Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, p. 21.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 29.

<sup>23</sup> E. Fromm, *Man for Himself*, p. 52.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 59.

one with productive orientation. They are components of the overall character of an individual, usually dominated by one type.<sup>25</sup>

*The receptive orientation.* Persons belonging to this orientation see all good beyond themselves<sup>26</sup> — material objects, feelings, love, knowledge, and pleasure should be taken from an external source. They are focused on being loved; their love is a form of giving back for what they get. They are afraid of being left on their own — then they feel helpless. They are characterized by exaggerated conformism and trust towards others.

*The exploitative orientation.* As in the case of receptive people, these people look for all goods outside. However, they do not expect them from others in the form of gifts but win them by force or trickery.<sup>27</sup> They are jealous; cynical; and above all, manipulative. They have a relationship with the people they can exploit. They only fall in love with people related to someone — because, like an object, they can take it from someone else. Their views are also not original: they are plagiarized, are always ideas stolen from others.

*The hoarding orientation.* These people's sense of security is based on collecting and saving.<sup>28</sup> They withdraw from the outside world; they are characterized by distrust of everything that comes from outside. They are not taking anything, but they are also not willing to give anything. This also applies to feelings: they find intimacy threatening. In their world, they like order and control; so if they show interest in another person, they try to take her over.

*The marketing orientation.* People with this orientation perceive themselves as a commodity — on the labour or matrimonial market — and reduce their value to exchange value.<sup>29</sup> According to them, success depends mainly on the ability to “sell yourself” at the highest possible price; qualifications and personality do not matter much. They are characterized by shaky self-esteem, and they do not show interest in authentic life and happiness — they want only to be a “selling commodity.” They have no inner depth — under the mask of appearances — they are interested only in the current market trends in order to be able to adapt to them and increase their value. They see other people similarly: as a commodity valued by the market.

*The productive orientation.* It describes the type of a healthy person fully realized in the sense of developing inborn dispositions. This person perceives the world in its full dimension, without distortions and falsifications. At the same time, he or she actively participates in it, transforming and enriching it by using human mental and emotional abilities.<sup>30</sup> Such an individual's attitude towards other people is based on the principle of equality and a sense of siblinghood. On the one hand, he or she is a social being; and on the other, having a sense of self-worth, he or she maintains separateness and individuality.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, p. 61.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, p. 62.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, p. 64.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, p. 65.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, p. 69.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, p. 84.

Personality, and an individual's character in particular, is determined by his or her system of orientation and devotion. Human beings always belong to a society that has a specific value system, instilled in them from an early age by their parents and then various institutions, for example, schools and churches. Public opinion is also of great importance in shaping the consciousness of the human individual. If universally prevailing ideas do not reflect the character of a particular person, then that individual's self-awareness is distorted. Public opinion is also of great importance in shaping the consciousness of the human individual. If universally prevailing ideas do not reflect the character of an individual, then that person's self-awareness is distorted: firstly, by incorporating certain ideas that do not have an emotional basis — they are empty phrases, mistakenly considered part of one's own worldview and having no influence on the undertaken activity — and secondly, some behavioural forces are suppressed or rationalized in the form of socially acceptable attitudes. As an example, from the first group, Fromm gives the universally accepted idea of equality of all people;<sup>31</sup> based on the results of the conducted research, it was found that for the majority of society this view is only a common opinion, not rooted in the emotional matrix of that individual's personality. On the other hand, a case of rationalization may be a passionate concern for another human being, which in fact masks the sadistic attitude of domination. In the process of discovering the actual attitude resulting from the character of a particular person, his or her worldview is examined in terms of inconsistencies and contradictions.<sup>32</sup> If pathological impulses are identified, an individual, through productive work on himself or herself, can transform them and permanently change his or her character.<sup>33</sup> Fromm distinguishes three attitudes that are the source of pathological behaviour:<sup>34</sup> narcissism, alienation, and necrophilia. Narcissism places the reality of what is subjectively experienced over the objective outside world. In the extreme case — when the ability to correct one's beliefs under the influence of the outside world — is lost, it is a form of psychosis. In a moderate version, a narcissistic person is capable of getting to know the outside world, but only in an intellectual dimension. He or she is unable to show empathy as it requires the ability to go beyond the subjective self. Isolation is a different form of alienation. Schaff distinguished two types:<sup>35</sup> objective and subjective. Objective alienation refers to a human's creations, all kinds of material institutions and objects that were originally intended to serve that person but over time acquired autonomy and power, leading to bureaucracy and excessive consumption. Subjective alienation, on the other hand, concerns typically human features, detached from humans and objectified. In addition to the examples given by Feuerbach and Marx, Fromm addresses the problem of the alienation of language, which, from a natural disposition serving the purpose of learning about reality, became the creator of sterile worldviews limiting humankind. Necrophilia is a permanent disposition against

<sup>31</sup> E. Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, p. 61.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 85.

<sup>33</sup> E. Fromm, *Man for Himself*, p. 229.

<sup>34</sup> E. Fromm, *The Pathology of Normalcy*, pp. 91–106.

<sup>35</sup> A. Schaff, *Alienacja jako zjawisko społeczne*, Warszawa 1999.

life; it manifests itself in the form of destructive behaviours towards oneself and the outside world.

By overcoming alienation, narcissism, and necrophilia, human beings will become integrated, active, and creative individuals. Only in this way can they realize their humanity, experience life to its fullest, and achieve true happiness.

A human being, living in a specific place and time, by establishing relationships with the outside world, in particular with other people, realizes only a small part of his or her potential. However, mainly during dreams, when the psychic apparatus is cut off from the outside world and the influence of cultural conditions imposing certain cognitive schemas is weakened, then the individual can discover hidden knowledge about himself or herself, inaccessible to discursive thought while awake.<sup>36</sup> This hidden knowledge, peculiar to all people, is expressed in a universal way, mainly during sleep or in an influx of artistic inspiration — in symbolic language.

## The Symbolic Language of the Unconscious

Erich Fromm, trying to penetrate the enigmatic matrix of the unconscious element of the human psyche, drew attention to the language through which what exists in the shadow of our being communicates with the sphere of the conscious “I.” The American psychoanalyst understood the conscious-unconscious dichotomy in what he said was functional, that is, one that referred to “the subjective state within the individual.”<sup>37</sup> He believed that the terms “conscious” and “unconscious” reflected his intuition regarding the content to which these terms referred. He understood both “conscious” and “unconscious” as kinds of states of the psyche, which he characterized in the following way:

Saying that the person is conscious of certain affects, etc., means *he is conscious* as far as these affects are concerned; saying that certain affects are unconscious means that he *is unconscious* as far as these contents are concerned. We must remember that “unconscious” does not refer to the absence of any impulse, feeling, desire, fear, etc., but only to the absence of *awareness* of these impulses.<sup>38</sup>

Starting from the point of view outlined above, Fromm rejected the metaphor defining the human psyche as a spatial structure consisting of specifically understood levels. Such a structure can be represented by the image of the house (consciousness) and the basement (unconscious) beneath it; then the “unconscious” itself will be easily replaced, through its spatial reference, by the term “subconscious,” which is not approved by Fromm.<sup>39</sup>

People who want to explore what, in their current experience, remains beyond the conscious sphere need to broaden the scope of their consciousness so as to see the contents hidden at the bottom of their minds, existing so far at a distance from their everyday experience (which does not prevent them from expressing them-

<sup>36</sup> E. Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope: Toward Humanized Technology*, New York 1968, p. 74.

<sup>37</sup> E. Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism*, New York 2013, p. 15.

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>39</sup> See ibidem, pp. 15–16.

selves in various human behaviour). The journey towards the unconscious begins with insight into the unconscious contents of mental processes such as thinking, feeling, or sensory experience; they all signal to the person interested in broadening awareness that something is alive and moving within that needs to be revealed and understood. Consciousness, following their signals, goes on a path towards self-knowledge.<sup>40</sup>

Experiencing the unconscious contents of the mind, people are faced with a fundamental choice; they can see before them the chaos of images, words, feelings, instincts, and memories without inner meaning, or perceive in the abyss of the psychic world the meaning expressed by the psyche with, as noted by Fromm, the oldest, universal language of humankind: a symbolic language.

Symbolic language is a language in which inner experiences, feelings and thoughts are expressed as if they were sensory experiences, events in the outer world. It is a language which has a different logic from the conventional one we speak in the daytime, a logic in which not time and space are the ruling categories but intensity and association. It is the one universal language the human race has ever developed, the same for all cultures and throughout history. It is a language with its own grammar and syntax, as it were, a language one must understand if one is to understand the meaning of myths, fairy tales and dreams.<sup>41</sup>

An individual gains insight into symbolic life through systems of reference through which the unconscious is revealed. A dream, a myth, a fairy tale, and even a novel can speak symbolically to someone who dares to understand it, thus embarking on the path of self-knowledge, offering the truth about an individual as well as the wisdom hidden within myths and fairy tales — the cultural works of humanity.

Introducing the specificity of the language of the unconscious, Fromm focused on formulating a definition and creating a basic classification of symbols — figuratively speaking of the “atoms” that make up the communication system of the unconscious mind sphere. So what, according to the American psychoanalyst, is a symbol? Fromm answers this question as follows:

A symbol is often defined as “something that stands for something else.” This definition seems rather disappointing. It becomes more interesting, however, if we concern ourselves with those symbols which are sensory expressions of seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, standing for a “something else” which is an inner experience, a feeling or thought. A symbol of this kind is something outside ourselves; that which it symbolizes is something inside ourselves. Symbolic language is language in which we express inner experience as if it were a sensory experience, as if it were something we were doing or something that was done to us in the world of things. Symbolic language is language in which the world outside is a symbol of the world inside, a symbol for our souls and our minds.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> See an interesting technique of self-analysis, referring to Freud’s method of free associations, based on an open observation of the flow of various thoughts, sensations, and emotions, without controlling their flow, in order to reveal points of resistance (at which thought often automatically stops) and discovering hidden relationships between the elements of the process of becoming consciousness (E. Fromm, *The Art of Being*, New York 2013, p. 58).

<sup>41</sup> E. Fromm, *The Forgotten Language*, New York 2013, p. 8; see also Immanuel Kant’s concept of *a priori* forms of time and space in M. Kuziak, *Słownik myśli filozoficznej*, Warszawa-Bielsko-Biała 2011, p. 216.

<sup>42</sup> E. Fromm, *The Forgotten Language*, p. 12.

The symbol understood in this way was diversified by Fromm, bringing to life three categories of symbols:

a) conventional (usually these are words or other signs referring a person who understands their meaning to a conventionally — usually culturally — established complex of meanings);

b) accidental (related to the personal experiences of a given person, the relationship between the symbol and the symbolized one comes down to an accidental coincidence — a specific symbol acquires meaning for a person on the basis of an individual experience's creating a subjective sense of the symbol);

c) universal (common to all humankind, refer to the links between the symbol and what is symbolized deeply rooted in the human mind — fire, water, air, and earth are good examples of these symbols, as they express the internal relationship between the general human experience of these elements and the correspondence of the world of thoughts, moods, or feelings adequate to this experience).<sup>43</sup>

What is cognitively interesting for the psychoanalyst is to understand the personal meaning of the last two groups of symbols displayed by the patient's unconscious. Discovering the meaning of symbols hidden inside the human mind is the fundamental goal of humanistic psychoanalysis, understood in the context of this chapter as a way of remembering the symbolic language of the unconscious that has been forgotten by humanity.<sup>44</sup>

Dreams became the main area of research on the nature of symbolic language for Fromm. Leading his thoughts, he started with Freud's concept of dream:

[T]hey are psychical phenomena of complete validity — fulfilments of wishes; they can be inserted into the chain of intelligible waking mental acts; they are constructed by a highly complicated activity of the mind.<sup>45</sup>

The above understanding of a dream focuses on perceiving it as the fulfilment of the dreamer's wish, which is the basis of Freud's interpretation of dreams; significantly, contrary to Fromm's thought that our dreams could express the irrational and vague as well as the rational and transparent aspects of man, Freud believed that a dream was essentially the fulfilment of an irrational wish.

Freud's theory [...] states [...] that we may have feelings and aspirations that drive our actions, but which we are not at all aware of. In Freudian terms, these are "unconscious aspirations," not because we are not aware of them, but because the strong action of "censorship" limits our ability to become aware of them. However, dreaming is another kind of behavioural element that Freud sees as the expression of unconscious pursuits. He claims that dreams reveal our unconscious aspirations, which are suppressed inside while awake. It also shows a similarity with the state of neurosis and mistakes, so it can be assumed that these ideas and feelings are found and come to life during sleep. They are called dreams by us.<sup>46</sup>

The idea of censorship internalized in the psyche (having its source in culture), which affects the unconscious sphere of the human mind, prompted Freud to the

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem, pp. 12–16.

<sup>44</sup> Ibidem, pp. 8–9.

<sup>45</sup> S. Freud, "The Interpretation of Dreams," transl. I. Smith, [in:] *Complete Works*, [https://www.valas.fr/IMG/pdf/Freud\\_Complete\\_Works.pdf](https://www.valas.fr/IMG/pdf/Freud_Complete_Works.pdf) (accessed: 10.04.2022), p. 622.

<sup>46</sup> M. Kowalska, *Koncepcje języka symbolicznego Ericha Fromma. Zapomniany język*, unpublished Bachelor's thesis, Wrocław 2003, p. 27.

concept of a dream as masked and distorted by this “censorship” product of the unconscious. Dreams understood in this way could use symbolic language to convey only “encrypted” messages in the form of images relating in a veiled manner to the unconscious and irrational desires of an individual symbolized by them.<sup>47</sup>

The most significant difference between the concepts of symbolic language by Freud and Fromm is based on their understanding of the function of symbolic language itself; for the former it comes down to “encrypting” the message of irrational aspirations of the unconscious while for the latter it is to express both the irrational and rational aspect of the unconscious. The understanding of the function of symbolic language, opposing Freud’s concept and slightly different from Fromm’s approach, was introduced by Carl Gustav Jung, who identified symbolic language with its ability to reveal, by meaningful images, wisdom hidden in the field of the unconscious which transcends the psyche of an individual. Thus, Jung’s concept of the function of symbolic language, apart from its difference in the scope of the psychic contents conveyed by this language (in Fromm’s case, the scope of these contents includes, to put it simply, the Freudian unconscious strivings of the individual and the Jungian wisdom of the psyche hidden in the unconscious), differs from Fromm’s concept in that it refers to the Swiss psychiatrist’s belief that the symbols of the unconscious present reality that transcends the individual, become the same voice “from there.” Fromm, on the other hand, believed that the symbolic language of the unconscious expresses only the creations of our own mind, in a dream subjected to a dangerous but also inspiring freedom:<sup>48</sup>

When we are asleep, we awake to another form of existence. We dream. We invent stories which never happened and sometimes for which there is not even any precedent in reality. Sometimes we are the hero, sometimes the villain; sometimes we see the most beautiful scenes and are happy; often we are thrown into extreme terror. But whatever the role we play in the dream we are the author, it is our dream, we have invented the plot.<sup>49</sup>

Referring to the phrase from the quotation, we would like to ask at the end of this chapter an intriguing question: isn’t it sometimes so, that in order to wake up from a hazy reality often experienced while awake, one does not have to fall asleep to wake up again?

## **Towards Existence — To Have or to Be? That Is the Question!**

In considering the question “Who is man?” Erich Fromm tried to answer it by distinguishing two primary human references to humanity, existence, and the world. He called the first of them the having mode, and the second the being mode.

[H]aving and being are two fundamental modes of experience, the respective strengths of which determine the differences between the characters of individuals and various types of social character.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> E. Fromm, *The Forgotten Language*, pp. 41–42.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 53–54.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 6.

<sup>50</sup> E. Fromm, *To Have or to Be?*, London-New York 1997, p. 14.

Orientation towards having determines the living of people and the dominant plane of their identification, because they identify their value and the meaning of life primarily with the value of things they own (including themselves), making themselves and everything outside of them a potential object to acquire and consume, being thrown out. Fromm analyzes the having mode as follows:

The sentence “I have something” expresses the relation between the subject, *I* (or he, we, you, they), and the object, *O*. It implies that the subject is permanent and the object is permanent. But is there permanence in the subject? Or in the object? I shall die; I may lose the social position that guarantees my having something. The object is similarly not permanent: it can be destroyed, or it can be lost, or it can lose its value. Speaking of having something permanently rests upon the illusion of a permanent and indestructible substance. If I seem to have everything, I have — in reality — nothing, since my having, possessing, controlling an object is only a transitory moment in the process of living.<sup>51</sup>

The experience of having carries with it an easily overlooked illusion of the immutability of the possessing subject and the possessed; in fact, as Fromm notices, this invariability boils down to a certain perception rigidly focused on “freezing” the flow of life, which in itself escapes the consciousness of the owner, trying to comprehend, enslave, and make it — against its nature — unchanging.

The nature of life for Fromm is linked to his processual character; humans, depending on the approach presented, on the level of possession try to convince themselves that both they and their things are of unchanging character; but what would happen if people ceased to constantly indoctrinate themselves? Perhaps then “being” would mean more to them than “having?” Perhaps then they would discover what exists beyond the words of a conventional symbolic language? Fromm was reluctant to describe the being mode he had distinguished because he remained faithful to the conviction that being cannot be contained even in the subtlest sense.<sup>52</sup> But when he wrote about being, he put it in these words:

The mode of being has as its prerequisites independence, freedom, and the presence of critical reason. Its fundamental characteristic is that of being active, not in the sense of outward activity, of busyness, but of inner activity, the productive use of our human powers. To be active means to give expression to one’s faculties, talents, to the wealth of human gifts with which — though in varying degrees — every human being is endowed. It means to renew oneself, to grow, to flow out, to love, to transcend the prison of one’s isolated ego, to be interested, to “list,” to give.<sup>53</sup>

Being is fulfilled in the same way in love, giving and realizing the talents innate to humankind, which help humans to express in life the fullness of their nature — the potential of the minds of individual and unique persons, revealing themselves to themselves, thus opening the lid of the box in which closed was the living presence of existence, hidden under the “mask” of the colourless existence of a human being of everyday life. So let us ask an important, thought-provoking question: how are we to cultivate the art of existence?

It seems that the ability to concentrate is the basis for practicing the art of existence. Fromm encourages a modern Westerner to exercise concentration, even for

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<sup>51</sup> Ibidem, p. 63.

<sup>52</sup> Ibidem, pp. 71–72.

<sup>53</sup> Ibidem, p. 72.

a few or several minutes a day, which, in his opinion, can help an individual living in chronic distraction.<sup>54</sup> With reference to the above, it should be noted that cultivating the art of existence does not require a person to act in relation to the constant mastery of the world of things and people. The old Chinese sage Lao Tzu once expressed words containing the spirit of Fromm's concept of the art of existence:

To conquer the world, one must renounce the effort.  
When there is effort  
The world is slipping through your hands.<sup>55</sup>

This is the case with the practice of existence, which — paradoxically — cannot be “practiced” in the conventional sense; existence can only be — become more of it, the less you are focused on having and “freezing” the process of living in the mind of a man trained by contemporary culture, wishing to comprehend the world.

We can now return to the question posed in the title of this chapter — “To Have or to Be?” — which leads us to the resolution of one of the most significant issues of philosophical anthropology — the question “Who is humanity?”

In the above-mentioned question, as Fromm notices, the word “who” plays a fundamental role because the question itself assumes that we are asking about a person, not a thing. This is a fundamental difference. If we were to ask “What is humanity?,” then there would be a possibility that we would objectify him in the very question, and thus also ourselves; thus to the question “What am I?” we would have to answer “I am something;” “I am a thing.”<sup>56</sup> Fromm, trying to think about the question “Who is man?” at one point in his speech, he unexpectedly replies:

Man is not something that can in some way be described from the outside, it can only be defined through one's own experience of being human. The question “Who is man?” leads to the question: “Who am I?” If we do not want to make the mistake of describing a man as a thing, then the answer to the question “who am I?” cannot be any different than: human.<sup>57</sup>

Of all the possible answers, the simplest one hits the heart of the question that has been troubling the minds of the greatest thinkers of Western civilization for nearly 2,500 years. Perhaps accepting the simplicity of the answer, with the fact that from behind the philosophical horizon of thoughts his own reflection looks at human being, it is not easy at all because to accept this answer, one must, at least for a moment, find a distance from the constant activity of human memory, which suggests various answers and allows us to refer back to the word “human” into a sphere that, poetically speaking, resembles the flight of a bird soaring above the horizon of history.

This text has led to a point at which a perverse question should be asked: how can one understand the value of memory against the background of Fromm's conception of humanity examined above? Much depends on how you approach the seat of memories; by focusing on an attitude oriented to the having mode, we consider

<sup>54</sup> E. Fromm, *The Art of Being*, pp. 39–40.

<sup>55</sup> R.L. Wing, *Tao Mocy*, transl. M. Lipa, Gliwice 2010, p. 121.

<sup>56</sup> E. Fromm, *O miłości do życia*, transl. J. Dudek, E. Kiersztura-Wojciechowska, Kraków 2018, p. 171.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 172 (transl. A.K., M.S.).

memory as our property, a collection of memories that define, like material objects, who we consider ourselves to be, thus shifting our sense of identity from being rooted to memories — things reifying “human” — one of the memories from the collection.

A person in a very simple, though not easy way, can exceed the collector's orientation discussed earlier (*the hoarding orientation*). It is enough to open your mind to the life “here and now.” In the element of writing, the above statement sounds as intelligent as it is banal. But the whole point is that this “here and now life,” before we make it a concept that we can understand, compare, question, or hermeneutically or analytically manipulate, is happening now; thus it creates a constantly returning moment of the directness of being, and the one experienced time and time again by a human being gives cyclically repeated possibility of becoming aware of it and thus the possibility of creative involvement in the currently lived experience. Sensitivity to the present moment helps people observing the movement of their memory not to lose themselves in the not so much overcrowded as claustrophobic storehouse of their memories. Thanks to it, a thinker discovering the inside of the psyche can experience a memory as a flash of the old present, which during introspection comes to life “again” like an image representing a more or less precise representation of a past situation.

The symbolic language that, according to Fromm, is “used” by the unconscious side of the human mind creates what we want to call *a symbolic expression*. It is a sequence of dream images experienced in a dream state. On the borderline between the absolute silence of a deeply dormant consciousness and an extroverted, fully conscious mind, a person can experience perhaps the most natural and spontaneous *a symbolic expression* of self that he or she would never have imagined.

According to Fromm, humans appear as beings seeking understanding. Understanding is honouring the inner truth.<sup>58</sup> Honouring the inner truth, we consent to ourselves as well as to who we are (this consent does not mean supporting ourselves in unethical actions). Sometimes it is a difficult task, sometimes easier than it seems; it is certain, however, that the path of self-understanding leads *to*, and paradoxically, *from* the point where the philosophical wanderer honours himself, even for a moment regaining the breath that people escaping freedom lack.

Thus, failure to escape from inner truth makes one free. Freedom of action turns one towards being. And *the freedom of being*, such a concept we propose, allows one to achieve the peace of the observer seated comfortably inside the not very comfortable space of the psyche, full of roughness and potholes, but still his own, the one he honoured.

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<sup>58</sup> This thought comes from an overheard statement, the author of which cannot be identified.

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