

## PSYCHOLOGY OF PERSONALITY

### **An existential criterion for normal and abnormal personality in the works of Erich Fromm**

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This is the first of four articles scheduled for publication in this journal on the position people with normal and abnormal personalities take in regard to so-called existential dichotomies. The main objective of this article is to propose a new, existential criterion for normal and abnormal personality implicitly present in the works of Erich Fromm. According to this criterion, normal and abnormal personalities are determined, first, by special features of the content of their position regarding existential dichotomies, and, second, by particular aspects of the formation of this position. Such dichotomies, entitatively existent in all human life, are inherent, two-alternative contradictions. The position of a normal personality in its content orients one toward a contradictory predetermination of life in the form of existential dichotomies and the necessity of searching for compromise in resolving these dichotomies. This position is created on a rational basis with the person's active participation. The position of an abnormal personality in its content subjectively denies a contradictory predetermination of life in the form of existential dichotomies and orients one toward a consistent, noncompetitive, and, as a consequence, one-sided way of life that doesn't include self-determination. This position is imposed by other people on an irrational basis. Abnormal personality interpreted like this is one of the most important factors influencing the development of various kinds of psychological problems and mental disorders — primarily, neurosis. In the following three articles it will be shown that this criterion is also implicitly present in the theories of personality devised by Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler, Carl Jung, Carl Rogers, and Viktor Frankl.

**Keywords:** human nature, human essence, existential dichotomy, normal personality, abnormal personality

## Introduction

The problem of normal and abnormal personality is one of the most important fundamental scientific problems of psychology; solving this problem is essential for success in performing a whole range of tasks in applied psychological science as well as in psychological practice. The most important of these tasks, which is related to the life of every human being, is that of designing a scientifically based system of values and practical recommendations in order to rear a normal personality. An equally important task is applying the criteria for normal and abnormal personality in diagnostics of personality development in children of different ages and in the selection and evaluation of staff working with people in clinical practice. Knowledge about normal and abnormal personality is essential for providing competent help, especially in psychotherapy and psychological counseling.

Despite its relevance, the problem of normality and abnormality of personality has not yet received any satisfactory solution. It has already become a tradition to refer to the most popular criteria for normality and abnormality (the key criteria are listed in Table 1) and to subject them to well-grounded criticism (Baron, 1995; Bratus, 1988; Carlson & Buskist, 1997; Coon, 1995; Davison & Neale, 1994; Halgin & Whitbourne, 2010; Mahoney, 1980; Perre & Baumann, 2012; Sarason & Sarason, 1989). Here I depart from this tradition and do not repeat these critical judgments, which are convincing and well known.

**Table 1.** Main criteria for normality and abnormality discussed in psychology

Criterion	Normality	Abnormality
Statistical	Matching arithmetic mean	Deviation from arithmetic mean
Culturological	Matching common norms and rules	Disagreement with common norms and rules
Adaptational	Adaptation to life in society	Social maladjustment
Clinical	Absence of psychiatric disease	Presence of psychiatric disease
Subjective	Absence of complaints of feeling unwell	Feeling unwell (distress)

## Objectives

This is the first of four articles scheduled for publication in this journal. The main objective here is to propose a new, existential criterion based on the works of Fromm. In the following articles I will show that this criterion is also implicitly present in the theories of personality devised by S. Freud, A. Adler, C. Jung, C. Rogers, and V. Frankl.

### ***Theoretical discussion***

A specific feature of Fromm's approach to the problem of normal and abnormal personality is that initially the question was raised and resolved in the wider context of philosophical ethical problems. From his point of view, one significant branch of ethics that is closely related to this problem can be distinguished: he calls it humanistic ethics. A specific characteristic of this branch is unraveled by Fromm: its opposition to authoritarian ethics. This opposition is based on two criteria, a formal one and a substantive one.

A formal difference between these two branches lies in their completely opposite solutions to the problem of who should set a system of values that humans have to adhere to during their whole life and how this can be done. From the point of view of authoritarian ethics, a human being is incapable of possessing knowledge of good and evil. For this reason, the system of values should, first, originate from a certain external source and, second, be imposed on humans apart from their own will and mind. It rests on an irrational basis: on the desires and emotions that human beings experience in regard to this external source; because of these desires and emotions, the source acquires power over human beings and the ability to control their behavior. In comparison, humanistic ethics recognizes humans' ability to possess knowledge of good and evil and, consequently, also recognizes their right to choose their life values by themselves, guided not by irrational feelings but by their experience and reason.

A substantive difference between these branches lies in their different understandings of the purpose of a value system in human life. In authoritarian ethics it has as a purpose control over human behavior in the interests of persons or organizations that are external to the human being and impose certain values. In humanistic ethics the purpose of a value system is to organize and guide human life in one's own interests.

Fromm distinguishes two major lines in humanistic ethics: subjective and objective; these lines differ in their understanding of human interests. Followers of the subjective line argue that humans' own interests are subjective and individual and that they consist of satisfaction of their wishes. In other words, every human being decides which wishes to satisfy, and the satisfaction of these wishes is the main purpose and value of human life. In comparison, from the point of view of the objective line, there are life interests that are objective and universal for all humans without exception, and their implementation should be the ultimate goal and value of each human life. Fromm's answer to the question of what are objective and universal life interests is given in one phrase: to live and to be alive. These words should by no means be interpreted and explained according to our ordinary notion of life and death, in which life is seen as a certain limited period of human existence from birth to death. According to the philosophy of objective humanistic ethics, to live and to be alive means living one's life according to one's own nature.

Within the context of objective humanistic ethics, if living one's own life in accordance with human nature is a supreme objective and universal value for a human, the result is an adequate understanding of good and evil: whatever facilitates

implementation of human nature in one's life is good, and everything that impedes it is evil. As Fromm puts it, "Good in humanistic ethics is the affirmation of life, the unfolding of man's powers. Virtue is responsibility toward his own existence. Evil constitutes the crippling of man's powers; vice is irresponsibility towards himself. ... The aim of human life is the growth and development of man in terms of his nature and constitution" (1947, pp. 20–29).

These philosophical ideas, developed within the framework of objective humanistic ethics, became the basis of Fromm's theoretical conceptualization of productive and nonproductive personality. The most general definition of a productive personality is the following: a productive personality is a type of individuality that contributes to living life according to the human essence.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, a nonproductive personality is a type of individuality that impedes implementation of the human essence in one's life. This counterproductive development of personality results in the transformation of a human into a different creature, one that is not completely a human.

Considering that, from the point of view of objective humanistic ethics, the way of life of the productive personality is the norm, a productive personality can be considered a normal personality, and a nonproductive personality, one differing from the norm, an abnormal one.

These general theoretical concepts of productive and nonproductive personality, in which the concept of human essence is the core, were developed by Fromm in a more detailed way in relation to two key questions: What are essential human characteristics? What are the types of individuality of productive and nonproductive personalities?

In his works Fromm gives two descriptions of essential human characteristics that are closely related to each other. The first essential characteristic is the so-called disharmony of human life. According to Fromm, the fundamental reason for this disharmony is the absence of instincts that could provide a human adap-

<sup>1</sup> As philosophers P. S. Gurevich and I. T. Frolov put it, the concept of human essence should be distinguished from the concept of human nature. From their point of view, human nature is characterized by "steady unvaried features, common markings and properties, showing its particular features of a living creature, which are innate for *Homo sapiens* in all times irrespective of biological evolution and historical process. To disclose these features means to express human nature" (Gurevich & Frolov, 1991, p. 3). Among these attributes there is a "superior, sovereign human quality. To unravel this quality means to comprehend the essence of the human" (p. 4). In such an interpretation the concept of human essence (from the logical point of view) is narrow compared with the concept of human nature. According to the distinction made by these authors, the concept of human essence may be defined as an assembly of one's most substantial human characteristics, by which one is validated — that is, due to which one is a human and not any other creature. This definition means that if we imagine a creature that may have all the characteristics typical for a human being except for substantial ones, such a creature can be characterized as anthropomorphic only — that is, such a creature resembles a human but is not a human in the precise meaning of that word. Despite the differences between the concepts of human nature and human essence described by Gurevich and Frolov, we have to agree with them that in the literature these concepts are used in similar ways — they fully coincide in scope. In the works of Fromm, among others, the term *human nature* is used mainly to mean *human essence*. Thus I make certain adjustments to Fromm's terminology so that from now on these two different terms are used according to their precise meanings.

tation to the environment and a genesis of mind. Because of the absence of instincts, a human being, who is a part of nature, becomes biologically maladapted to life in the natural environment. Because of one's mind, one discovers the problematic character of life conditions and faces a number of so-called dichotomies. The term *dichotomy* is used by Fromm to specify two-alternative contradictions, objectively existent in human life, that appear as problems craving solution. In his opinion, two kinds of dichotomies can be differentiated: the existential and the historical.

Existential dichotomies are intrinsic to the nature of human life, which is emphasized by the term *existential*. Consequently, they are objectively inherent. Because, from Fromm's point of view, they characterize not just human nature but the very essence of it, we may say that humans in their essence are destined to live with existential dichotomies. Among the examples of an existential dichotomy, Fromm uses one often: the dichotomy of life and death; this dichotomy appears as a result of human consciousness of the fact that one's existence has a finite character. It lies in the objectively existent contradiction between the natural human wish to live eternally and the realization of the meaninglessness of life in front of future death.

Historical dichotomies, unlike existential ones, are not essential to human nature, although they are also present in human life. Their content is specific for every historical period of social development; they are created by humans themselves and for this reason can be eliminated by them.

Therefore the main content of the concept of the disharmony of human existence as an essential characteristic of human beings is the fact that human life is not fully determined or set or programmed in advance. It is possible to speak about the predetermination of human life only in the sense that life is set as a problem, as a row of existential dichotomies: entitatively existent in human life are two-alternative contradictions that require solution. Fromm emphasizes that "man is the only animal for whom his own existence is a problem which he has to solve and from which he cannot escape" (1947, pp. 39–40).

The second essential human characteristic is that humans are free creatures. In other words, self-determination is necessarily present in human life, which is problematic and, due to this, uncertain.

It is obvious that these two essential human characteristics are closely related to each other and cannot exist without each other because a human can be free and manifest freedom only when life is neither set nor determined by anyone or anything. Thus, from Fromm's point of view, to be a human in itself means to exist relying on oneself, to make independent decisions in solving existential dichotomies, to base oneself on one's own experience and reason, and not to allow any, in his terms, heteronomous influences — that is, influences that control one's consciousness and behavior externally.

Discussion about Fromm's representation of the types of individuality of productive and nonproductive personalities should begin with his notion of the main driving force of personality development. This driving force is a human need for harmonizing one's life, a need for a noncontradictory, noncompetitive existence.

This need inevitably appears as a human reaction to objective disharmony and uncertainty regarding the very essence of one's life. It provokes humans to develop general representations of the world and of themselves that contain univocal solutions to the numerous existential and historical dichotomies they face in life and that consequently tell them how they should and shouldn't live. If these representations are able to show ways of solving contradictions, to prescribe how to act in certain problem situations, they are naturally taking the function of harmonizing life. A particular feature of these common representations is that they are not just cognitive representations but are also representations that humans believe to be true.

Fromm calls these general representations of the world and the human place in it schemes of orientation and worship because, on the one hand, they guide human beings in resolving contradictions on the cognitive side, and, on the other hand, they are the objects of faith and, consequently, have power over behavior. Examples of such schemes of orientation and worship are various religious, philosophical, ideological, and scientific movements; systems of moral values; and rules and norms of behavior accepted in different classes, social strata, and groups. Because of human belief in the accuracy of these representations, they are used as a guideline for certain actions; they lead and control human behavior just as instinctive mechanisms lead and control animal behavior. As a result, human life achieves certainty and direction, and human behavior acquires features of consistency and steadiness.

In real life one may see many schemes of orientation and worship; they vary in content, and it is almost impossible to make a full list of them. It is important to emphasize that humans, being more or less free in choosing these schemes, cannot avoid them because their need to have them derives from their essence: "Man is not free to choose between having or not having 'ideals,' but he is free to choose between different kinds of ideals" (Fromm, 1947, p. 49).

According to Fromm, schemes of orientation and worship form the basis of human character, which mainly determines whether one's personality is productive or nonproductive. The character of a productive personality is based on productive schemes of orientation and worship; the character of a nonproductive personality is based on nonproductive ones. These types of characters determine different ways of living, which are classified as oriented toward being or toward having. Orientation toward being is seen among productive personalities; orientation toward having, among nonproductive ones. These two types of characters and the corresponding ways of life should be regarded as ideal types; they cannot be seen in reality. Both of them are found in each human, but in different proportions, so that some people have a dominant productive type of character, some have a dominant nonproductive type.

The specific character of productive and nonproductive schemes of orientation and worship, which are, as has already been mentioned, the basis of human character, can be described using two main characteristics related to the content and the special aspects of the formation of these schemes. To begin with nonproductive schemes, a substantive characteristic of them is that they objectively deny a contradictory predetermination of human life in the form of objectively existing and

inherent existential dichotomies, thereby orienting a human toward a consistent, noncompetitive, and, as a consequence, one-sided way of life.

A distinctive feature of the formation of nonproductive schemes is that they are imposed by others, based on the desires and feelings that one experiences in relation to them — that is, on an irrational basis. Hence nonproductive schemes are not a result of human self-determination.

Thus, nonproductive schemes of orientation and worship do not correspond to the human essence, and they prevent humans from living in accordance with it. In the opinion of Fromm, the main characteristic of the way of life of a human with a nonproductive orientation is the performance of so-called nonproductive, or alienated, activity in all spheres of that person's life. Characterizing this activity, Fromm remarks that "in alienated activity *I* do not really act; I am *acted upon* by external or internal forces. I have become separated from the result of my activity" (1977, p. 74).

Nonproductive activity characterizes subtle nuances of human life that are difficult to understand and require additional special explanations. For this purpose we may use an example by Fromm in which nonproductive activity is shown on the material of so-called posthypnotic human behavior.

Here is the subject A, whom the hypnotist B puts into hypnotic sleep, and suggests to him that after awaking from the hypnotic sleep he will want to read a manuscript, which he will believe he has brought with him, that he will seek it and not find it, that he will then believe that another person, C, has stolen it, that he will get very angry at C. He is also told that he will forget that all this was a suggestion given to him during the hypnotic sleep. It must be added that C is a person towards whom the subject has never felt any anger and, according to the circumstances, has no reason to feel angry; furthermore, that he actually has not brought any manuscript with him.

What happens? A awakes and, after a short conversation about some topic, says, "Incidentally, this reminds me of something I have written in my manuscript. I shall read it to you." He looks around, does not find it, and then turns to C, suggesting that he may have taken it; getting more and more excited when C repudiates the suggestion, he eventually bursts into open anger and directly accuses C of having stolen the manuscript. He goes even further. He puts forward reasons which should make it plausible that C is the thief. (1942, p. 67)

In this example we should pay attention to an important characteristic of nonproductive activity: that the person does not recognize it as being external. Subject A is fully convinced that all the thoughts, feelings, images, wishes, and actions suggested by B belong to him personally. Moreover, if an external observer does not know about the preceding hypnotic suggestion, he, as well as A himself, is convinced that all these thoughts, feelings, images, wishes, and actions of A belong to him.

This example is illustrative for Fromm also because it models real human life precisely. Fromm is convinced that not only in the situation of hypnotic suggestion but also in conditions of everyday life many thoughts, feelings, wishes, and actions that one perceives as one's own and that are perceived so by others do not really be-

long to oneself but are imposed by an external source. Such external sources, performing the function of hypnotist in everyday life, are, first of all, parents and other near persons: relatives, friends, loved ones. Teachers, books, movies, media may also be external sources. Moreover, human personality itself and not only thoughts, feelings, images, wishes, and actions can have an external origin. Fromm calls such a personality a pseudo-self or pseudo-personality. A pseudo-self is formed by non-productive schemes of orientation and worship imposed by other humans. If one identifies oneself with these schemes and perceives them as one's own, the result is alienation from oneself.<sup>1</sup>

Productive schemes of orientation and worship are fundamentally different from nonproductive schemes in content as well as in the way they are formed. A substantive characteristic of productive schemes is that they orient a human being toward contradictory outcomes of life in the form of existential dichotomies—that is, toward a way of life that is in accordance with its essence. People who have schemes of this type realize the disharmony in their existence: they realize that their life is neither determined nor set in advance, that they alone must search for and find a compromise in resolving numerous existential dichotomies. They do not deny but take into account the contradictory requirements of these dichotomies, relying on their own competence in doing so, and they perform productive, nonalienated activity in all spheres of life. According to Fromm, the concept of productive activity means that any form of human activity is initiated by oneself and not by heteronomous (external) sources that are controlling one's mind and behavior. Thus, such activity is not alienated from the human; on the contrary, the human is fully involved in it. According to Fromm, “Nonalienated activity is a process of giving birth to something, of producing something and remaining related to what I produce. This also implies that my activity is a manifestation of my powers, that I and my activity and the result of my activity are one. I call this nonalienated activity *productive activity*” (1977, p. 74).

Characterizing particular features of the formation of productive schemes, Fromm emphasizes that they are formed on a rational basis with the active participation of the person — that is, on the basis of knowledge originating from the person's own experience and reason. As a result, one's belief in the accuracy of productive schemes is based on one's own convictions. Fromm calls this type of belief rational, as distinct from irrational. According to him, “Irrational faith is a fanatic conviction in somebody or something, rooted in submission to a personal or impersonal irrational authority. Rational faith, in contrast, is a firm conviction, based on productive intellectual and emotional activity” (1947, p. 203).

A nonproductive personality, which leads to the transformation of a human into a different creature, which is not a human, is regarded by Fromm as one of the most important psychological prerequisites for developing various

<sup>1</sup> Fromm draws on the concept of alienation of Karl Marx, whose works he greatly appreciated, considering himself a convinced Marxist.



kinds of problems and mental disorders, especially neurosis. In his opinion, "Heteronomous interference with the child's and the later person's growth process is the deepest root of mental pathology, especially of destructiveness" (1977, p. 66).

Such an understanding of the psychological prerequisite for developing various kinds of problems and mental and behavioral disorders results in the main purpose of psychological help. This purpose is the revival of the specifically human in the human being or, as Fromm puts it, the healing of a person's soul. In practice the purpose is to help people realize the main reason for their psychological problems or diseases, which are rooted in their way of life and are related to the nonproductive orientation of their character. They are thus shown a way to solve their problems or to recover, which involves a radical change of character, and they can then turn to a new, productive way of life in accordance with the human essence.

## **Results**

Fromm develops his theoretical understanding of personality based on the philosophical branch of so-called objective humanistic ethics, which proposes a certain idea of how a human should live. The ultimate moral imperative of a human, following what should be considered a standard of life, involves determining on a rational basis such values for oneself in order to facilitate living one's life in accordance with human nature.

Based on this school of thought, Fromm proposes his own theoretical concept of human nature, which has two essential characteristics. The first characteristic is that in human life there are existential dichotomies, which are inherent, two-alternative contradictions. They appear to a person as problems requiring solutions. The second characteristic is that a human being has self-determination.

The most important concepts in the works of Fromm are the productive personality and the nonproductive personality, which are characterized by particular features of content and formation of a position in relation to these two characteristics. Fromm defines this position as schemes of orientation and worship. If a position of a personality (a scheme of orientation or worship) in its content and in its way of being formed facilitates implementation of these two characteristics, such a personality is defined by Fromm as productive; if not, it is defined as nonproductive. Considering that from the point of view of objective humanistic ethics the way of life of a productive personality is a norm of human life because it corresponds to human nature, a productive personality can be defined as a normal personality, and a nonproductive personality, one differing from norms, as an abnormal one.

Given that according to Fromm the essence of human life is characterized by existential dichotomies and by self-determination, the position of a productive (normal) personality must be compromising in its content, matching the contradictory structure of human life in the form of existential dichotomies, and it must be created by oneself, based on one's own experiences and reason—that is, on a rational basis.

On the contrary, the position of a nonproductive (abnormal) personality denies the contradictive structure of human life in the form of existential dichotomies and orients the person toward a consistent, noncompetitive, and, as a consequence, one-sided way of life. A specific feature of this position is that it is imposed by others and is based on wishes and feelings; it thus has an irrational basis. From the point of view of Fromm, abnormality of personality interpreted like this is one of the most important factors influencing the development of various kinds of life problems and mental disorders, especially neurosis.

Given that in the works of Fromm the criterion for differentiating normality and abnormality of personality is specific feature of one’s position in regard to existential dichotomies, I mark this criterion as existential.

**Conclusion**

In a compact manner the existential criterion can be illustrated by the three main differences shown in the Table 2, which are related to the content and the formation of a position that a person takes toward existential dichotomies.

**Table 2.** The existential criterion for normal and abnormal personality

<b>Characteristics of the position taken by a person toward existential dichotomies</b>		
	<b>Normal personality</b>	<b>Abnormal personality</b>
Content of the position	<b><i>Compromising</i></b> Orients toward a contradictious predetermination of life in the form of existential dichotomies and the necessity of searching for compromise in resolving them	<b><i>One-sided</i></b> Orients towards a consistent, non-competitive, and, as a consequence, one-sided way of life, denying the contradictious predetermination of human life in the form of existential dichotomies
Formation of the position	<b><i>Own</i></b> Result of self-determination	<b><i>Imposed</i></b> Formed by others
	<b><i>Rational</i></b> Based on own experience and reason	<b><i>Irrational</i></b> Based on wishes and feelings

**Application of the results**

I have shown in a number of empirical studies (Kapustin, 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c) that the key factor leading to child-parent problems in families of psychological-consultation clients is the abnormality of the parents’ personality, identified through the existential criterion, which is displayed in their parenting styles. These parenting styles contribute to the formation of children with abnormal personality types, also identified through the existential criterion. These abnormal personality types are designated as “oriented on external help,” “oriented on compliance of one’s own behavior with other people’s requirements,” and “oriented on protest

against compliance of one's own behavior with other peoples' requirements." Children with such personality types are faced with requirements from their closest social environment that are appropriate for children with normal personal development but are not appropriate for children with abnormal abilities, and so they start having problems. As these problems are connected with troubles of adjustment to social-environment requirements, they can be classified as problems of social adaptation. There is a similarity between a personality type "oriented on compliance of one's own behavior with other people's requirements" and theoretical concepts in the work of Fromm, Freud, Adler, Jung, Rogers, and Frankl about people with abnormal personalities being predisposed to the emergence of various psychological problems and mental disorders. This fact suggests that a personality of this type can be regarded as a classic type of personality, which all these authors faced in their psychotherapeutic practice at different times.

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