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**HUMANISTIC ETHICS: AN UNDERSTANDING OF ERICH FROMM'S  
PERSPECTIVES**

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**Introduction**

Humanistic ethics is a branch of ethics which emphasizes the inherent worth and dignity of all human beings. It focuses on human values, interests and experiences rejecting the idea of super natural or divine authority in moral decision making. It also promotes ethics grounded in human autonomy and freedom, empathy and compassion, rationality, social responsibility and a concern for the well-being of individuals. There are many supporters of humanistic ethics, such as— Socrates, Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, Jean-Paul Sartre, Erich Fromm and so on. Erich Fromm, a social psychologist, psychoanalyst and philosopher, developed a comprehensive framework of humanistic ethics, advocating an ethical system based on love, compassion and respect for human life. Fromm's humanistic ethics is a key component of his broader philosophical and psychological thought. His ethical philosophy is deeply rooted in his critique of both authoritarian and conformist tendencies in society. He believed that for humanity to flourish, individuals must be free to pursue self-realization in a society and love above material wealth and power.

**Humanistic Ethics and Authoritarian Ethics**

Humanistic ethics is based on the inherent worth and dignity of the individual. It argues that the standards for ethical behaviour come from human needs, nature and the pursuit of human fulfilment. Humanistic ethics emphasizes autonomy and self-realization. Individuals are seen as capable of determining what is good or bad based on their own reasoning, experiences and empathy. The aim of humanistic ethics is the growth and self-actualization of the person. Ethical decisions are guided by what enhances the life and well-being of humans, individually and collectively. Fromm believes that humanistic ethics fosters values like love, creativity, freedom and justice which are intrinsic to human nature. Fromm argues that in humanistic ethics, each person is responsible for their own moral development and right action is one that promotes the true nature and potential of the individual.

Authoritarian ethics on the other hand, derives its principles from an external authority, such as a religious leaders, governments or societal norms. The source of morality is not the individual but the authority which dictates what is right or wrong. This ethical system

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emphasizes obedience, submission and conformity to the rules and commands of the authority. The purpose of authoritarian ethics is to maintain order, stability and power structures within society. The individuals are seen as needing guidance from a superior power because they are viewed as fundamentally flawed or incapable of determining what is right or wrong on their own. The individual's role is to obey rules without questioning because the authority is considered infallible or superior. The authority sets obedience to the virtue and disobedience to the sin. Even in the case of authoritarian ethics, if a person sins and accepts his punishment and guilt, is restored to goodness because of his acceptance of the superiority of authority. Fromm (1949) remarks:

*The Old Testament, in its account of the beginnings of man's history, gives an illustration of authoritarian ethics. The sin of Adam and Eve is not explained in terms of the act itself; eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil was not bad per se; in fact, both the Jewish and the Christian religions agree that the ability to differentiate between good and evil is a basic virtue. The sin was disobedience, the challenge to the authority of God, who was afraid that man, having already "become as one of us, to know good and evil," could "put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life and live forever." (p. 12)*

According to Erich Fromm, humanistic ethics is different from authoritarian ethics in two ways: (I) Formally, it identifies that only man himself can exercise their virtue and sin, and not any supernatural power or authority beyond him. (II) Materially, it signifies the principle that good is what is good for man and evil is what is harmful to man, is the only standard for ethical value for man's well-being (Fromm, 1949, pp. 12-13). For Erich Fromm, in humanistic ethics, morality arises from within the individual and is based on human needs and rational thought. In authoritarian ethics, morality is imposed by an external authority. Humanistic ethics encourages personal responsibility and self-direction. Authoritarian ethics emphasizes obedience and conformity to authority. Humanistic ethics aims at the development of the individual and the enhancement of life. Authoritarian ethics seeks to preserve social order and the power of the authority. It is motivated by fear of punishment or the desire for reward and both of which are controlled by the authority.

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Fromm insists that the ethical thought of Aristotle, Spinoza and Marx emphasize the importance of human development, self-realization and the creation of a society that allows for the flourishing of all individuals. He integrates these ideas into his own humanistic ethics advocating for a life oriented towards love. Fromm is inspired by Aristotle's concept of productiveness in his ethical system. He also supports that pleasure which gives deepest human satisfaction comes from the highest development of our faculties. Fromm highlights Aristotle's concept of "eudaimonia"<sup>1</sup> i.e., flourishing or well-being as central to humanistic ethics. For Aristotle, the highest good is living a life in accordance with reason and achieving one's full potential. This idea of self-actualisation aligns with Fromm's belief in the importance of personal growth and the realization of one's inherent capacities. Fromm admires Spinoza's ethical system, which is rooted in the idea of understanding oneself and the universe. Spinoza emphasizes the importance of rational understanding and living in harmony with nature, which Fromm interprets as a form of self-realization and ethical living. Spinoza's concept of the "intellectual love of God" is seen as an expression of love and understanding that leads to human flourishing. Fromm views Marx as a humanist who sought to create a society in which individuals could fully realize their potential. Marx's critique of capitalism is not just economic but also moral, as he believed that capitalist systems dehumanize individuals and prevent them from achieving their full potential. Fromm sees Marx's vision of a classless society as one where human-beings can live authentically and in solidarity with one another, free from alienation. (Wilde, 2004)

### **Human Nature and Freedom**

Fromm's understanding of human nature is rooted in his synthesis of psychoanalysis, existentialism and Marxist's thought. He argues that human nature is not a fixed or predetermined essence but rather a dynamic potential that can develop in various directions depending on social and cultural conditions.

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'flourishing' and the expression 'human flourishing', started out as a way of referring specially to Aristotle's and the Greek idea of *eudaimonia*. Aristotle. (2020) *Nicomachean Ethics*. Beresford, A. (trans.) Penguin Classics. p. 270

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**1. Biophilia and Necrophilia:** Fromm believed in the existence of two opposing tendencies within human nature: the love of life (biophilia) and the love of death or destruction (necrophilia). For him, a healthy, well-balanced individual leans towards biophilia, which includes creativity, growth and a deep appreciation for life. Necrophilia, on the other hand, is associated with destructiveness, cruelty, and a fascination with death. (Fromm, 1973)

**2. Human Needs:**

Erich Fromm's theory of human needs is a central component of his humanistic philosophy, which explores how individuals seek fulfilment and meaning in their lives. Fromm identifies several fundamental human needs that shape human behaviour and relationships. These needs are integral to his understanding of human nature, freedom and the pursuit of happiness. Here's a look at Fromm's conception of human needs:

- **Existential Needs** (Fromm, 1956)

Fromm's focus is primarily on existential needs, which he sees as crucial to human well-being and development. These include:

- (i) **Relatedness:** This refers to the human desire to connect with others in meaningful and productive ways. Fromm argues that people need to form deep and caring relationships to overcome feelings of isolation and alienation. Relatedness involves love, friendship, and community and is central to achieving personal fulfilment.
- (ii) **Transcendence:** This need reflects the human desire to rise above the mundane aspects of existence and achieve something greater than oneself. Transcendence involves creative and productive activities, as well as striving for personal and societal transformation. Fromm believes that fulfilling this need helps individuals find purpose and meaning in their lives.
- (iii) **Rootedness:** Rootedness is the need to feel grounded and secure in one's environment and identity. It involves having a stable sense of self and a connection to one's cultural and social context. Fromm argues that a sense of rootedness helps individuals feel secure and integrated into their world.
- (iv) **Sense of Identity:** This need involves the quest for a coherent and stable sense of self. Fromm argues that individuals need to develop a clear sense of who they are, which involves self-awareness, self-acceptance and a sense of personal continuity. A strong

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identity helps individuals navigate life's challenges and maintain psychological stability.

- (v) **Need for a Frame of Orientation and Devotion:** Fromm contends that humans need a framework to make sense of their lives and a cause or purpose to devote themselves to. This involves having a set of beliefs or values that provide meaning and direction, as well as a sense of commitment to a greater cause or purpose.

Fromm's humanistic perspective emphasizes that the fulfilment of these existential needs is essential for personal growth and well-being. He argues that modern society often fails to meet these needs adequately, leading to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and dissatisfaction. Fromm critiques contemporary capitalist society for promoting superficial values that neglect existential needs. He argues that materialism, consumerism and the pursuit of status undermine the fulfilment of deeper human needs and contribute to a sense of alienation.

### 3. Social Character:

Fromm introduced the concept of the "social character,"<sup>2</sup> which refers to the way human nature is shaped by societal and cultural influences. While we have inherent tendencies, our character structure is largely formed by the economic, social and cultural environment. This idea bridges individual psychology with social theory, emphasizing that to understand human nature fully, one must consider the broader social context. (Durkin, 2014)

4. **Productive and Non-Productive Orientations:** Fromm distinguished between productive and non-productive orientations in human nature. Productive orientation refers to the ability to use one's powers creatively and meaningfully, contributing to the world through love and reason. Non-productive orientations, such as hoarding, exploiting or submitting reflect alienation from one's true nature and lead to destructive behaviours. (Fromm, 1949, pp. 84-88)

### 5. Freedom

Freedom is also a central theme in Fromm's work, particularly in "*Escape from Freedom*" he explores the dialectical nature of freedom, distinguishing between two types: negative freedom (freedom from) and positive freedom (freedom to).

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<sup>2</sup> Erich Fromm uses the term 'social character' in his book *Escape from Freedom*, to show the function of it is 'to mold and channel human energy within a given society for the purpose of continued functioning of this society.'

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- **Negative Freedom:**

Negative freedom refers to freedom from external constraints, such as tyranny, oppression or authority. Fromm acknowledges the importance of this kind of freedom, particularly in the context of historical struggles for liberation. However, he argues that mere freedom from external restraints is not sufficient for genuine human fulfilment.

- **Positive Freedom:**

Fromm acknowledges that positive freedom is the freedom to be oneself, to realize one's true potential, and to live authentically. This involves the active expression of one's individual nature and the pursuit of self-realization. Positive freedom is not just about the absence of constraints but also about the presence of inner freedom—the ability to think, feel and act in ways that are true to one's self. (Fromm, 1969)

Fromm's analysis of freedom also includes the paradoxical fear that can accompany it. While people may desire freedom, they often find it frightening because it entails responsibility and uncertainty. This fear can lead individuals to escape from freedom by submitting to authoritarian systems, conforming to societal norms, or engaging in compulsive behaviours that relieve them from the burden of freedom. In Fromm's ethical framework, true freedom is inseparable from the ability to love and to engage in productive, meaningful work. He sees ethical behaviour as arising from the realization of our true nature and the fulfilment of our human potential. Ethical life, for Fromm, involves living in accordance with our intrinsic capacities for love, creativity and reason.

### **Being and Having Mode of Existence**

Erich Fromm's concepts of "having" and "being" are central to his social and ethical philosophy, particularly explored in his book *"To Have or To Be?"* (1976). In this work, Fromm contrasts two fundamental modes of existence: the **having mode** and the **being mode**. These modes represent different ways of relating to the world, others and oneself and they have profound implications for human well-being and society.

#### **1. The Having Mode of Existence**

The having mode is characterized by a focus on possession, control and accumulation. In this mode, individuals define themselves and their value by what they own or possess—whether it

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be material goods, status, power or even knowledge. The having mode is rooted in the desire to acquire and keep, leading to a sense of security through possession.

Key characteristics of the having mode include:

- **Possessiveness:** People in the having mode are primarily concerned with owning and holding onto things, which can extend beyond material goods to include relationships, knowledge, or even experiences.
- **Materialism:** The having mode emphasizes material wealth and external success as the primary measures of a person's worth.
- **Attachment:** There is a strong attachment to possessions, leading to fear of loss and a constant desire for more.
- **Alienation:** Individuals in the having mode often experience alienation from themselves, others, and the world, as their focus on possession prevents deep, meaningful connections.

### **The Being Mode of Existence**

The being mode, in contrast, is characterized by a focus on presence, experience and authenticity. In this mode, individuals define themselves by their actions, relationships and inner qualities rather than by what they own. The being mode emphasizes living in the moment, engaging authentically with others and cultivating inner growth.

Key characteristics of the being mode include:

- **Authenticity:** In the being mode, people are more concerned with being true to themselves and living according to their values rather than conforming to external expectations.
- **Creativity:** The being mode fosters creativity, spontaneity and the expression of one's true self.
- **Relatedness:** Individuals in the being mode seek meaningful connections with others characterized by love, empathy and mutual respect.
- **Fulfilment:** The being mode leads to a sense of fulfilment and inner peace as it aligns with the deeper needs of human nature for growth, love and understanding.

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(Lankshear,2003)

Fromm argues that the having mode is dominant in modern, capitalist societies, where consumerism and material success are often seen as the ultimate goals in life. This focus on possession leads to a sense of emptiness and dissatisfaction because it does not fulfil deeper human needs for connection, creativity and self-actualization. It leads to various social and psychological problems, such as alienation, anxiety and environmental degradation. Fromm argues that the being mode is the path to genuine happiness and well-being. It allows individuals to transcend the superficial satisfaction of possession and engage in a life that is meaningful, purposeful and connected to others. (Fromm, 1997)

### **The Role of Society<sup>3</sup>**

In Erich Fromm's humanistic ethics, society plays a crucial role in shaping individual behaviour, values and well-being. Fromm's perspective integrates the interplay between personal development and societal structures, emphasizing that societal conditions significantly influence human potential and ethical living. Fromm also emphasizes the role of society in shaping human nature and freedom. He critiques modern capitalist societies for promoting alienation and conformity and he advocates for a social structure that supports the development of positive freedom and genuine human relationships.

### **Ethics and the Art of Loving**

For Fromm, the highest expression of human freedom and the fulfilment of human nature lies in the practice of love. In his famous work *The Art of Loving* (1956), he describes love as an active, creative force that involves care, responsibility, respect and knowledge. Love, in Fromm's ethical framework, is the antidote to alienation and the key to achieving true freedom. Fromm categorizes love into different types, each with its unique characteristics. He identifies the following forms of love:

- **Brotherly Love:** This is the love between equals, characterized by care, responsibility, respect and knowledge. Fromm sees it as the most fundamental kind of love, forming the basis for all other types of love.

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<sup>3</sup> Erich Fromm argues that many of the problems in contemporary society stem from structural issues that need

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to be addressed to create a truly 'sane' society.

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- **Motherly Love:** This is the unconditional love a mother has for her child, representing the ideal of selfless care and nurturing. However, Fromm warns that this love can become possessive and limiting if not balanced with respect for the child's individuality.
- **Erotic Love:** This is the passionate love between two individuals that seeks union and intimacy. While important, Fromm argues that erotic love can be fleeting and often confused with mere sexual attraction if not rooted in a deeper connection.
- **Self-Love:** Contrary to the common belief that self-love is selfish. Fromm argues that genuine self-love is essential for loving others. It involves caring for oneself, recognizing one's worth and not seeking validation from others.
- **Love of God:** This form of love represents the longing for union with the divine or the ultimate reality. Fromm discusses this in the context of different religious traditions, emphasizing that it should lead to greater love for humanity rather than withdrawal from the world. (Fromm, 1957)

Ethical living, for Fromm, involves cultivating the capacity to love, which includes care, respect, responsibility and knowledge. This kind of love is not possessive or dependent but is rooted in mutual growth and the affirmation of others' freedom and dignity.

### **1. Love as an Art**

In "*The Art of Loving*" Fromm describes love as an art that involves knowledge, effort and practice. This aligns with his humanistic perspective, which sees love as an active process rather than a passive experience.

- **Knowledge:** Understanding oneself and the other person is crucial for developing genuine love. Fromm argues that love requires a deep awareness of one's own needs and desires, as well as a profound understanding of the other person's experiences and perspectives.
- **Effort and Discipline:** Love is not just a feeling but a practice that demands effort and discipline. Fromm emphasizes that true love involves continuous work, including caring for others, taking responsibility, respecting their individuality and cultivating empathy.
- **Growth:** Love is seen as a dynamic and evolving process. Fromm's humanistic

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perspective suggests that as individuals grow and change, their capacity for love also

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deepens. This growth involves overcoming personal limitations and developing a greater capacity for connection and empathy. (Fromm, 1957, pp. 26-33)

## **2. Love and Society**

Fromm critically examines how modern society affects our ability to love. He argues that societal values often undermine genuine love by promoting materialism, consumerism and superficial relationships.

- **Critique of Consumerism:** Fromm criticizes the commodification of love in contemporary society, where relationships are often seen through the lens of market transactions. He believes that this commodification distorts the true nature of love and leads to dissatisfaction and superficial connections.
- **Humanistic Values:** Fromm advocates for a shift towards values that promote human dignity, creativity and solidarity. He argues that a more humanistic society would support the development of genuine love by fostering environments that encourage authentic connections and personal growth.

In *“The Art of Loving”* Erich Fromm’s humanistic perspective frames love as an active and disciplined practice that is essential for personal growth and authentic connection. Love is seen as both a means of realizing one’s true potential and a pathway to overcoming existential alienation. Fromm’s analysis encourages individuals to cultivate love through knowledge, effort and genuine engagement, while also critiquing societal values that hinder true connection. His humanistic approach offers a profound and optimistic view of love as central to a fulfilling and ethical life.

## **Conclusion**

Erich Fromm’s Humanistic Ethics calls for a personal and social transformation. Individuals are encouraged to become more self-aware to embrace freedom and responsibility and to cultivate love and productive living. His ethics advocates the structures that promote human well-being, autonomy and cooperation rather than competition and domination. Fromm’s humanistic ethics is a comprehensive framework that emphasizes the importance of individual freedom, love, creativity and the full realization of human potential. It believes that humans are capable of living morally good lives by aligning their actions with their true nature. It

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discards the system which relies on external authority or conformity to societal norms. So, we can say that Erich Fromm's humanistic ethics is deeply rooted in his psychoanalytic and sociological work which emphasize the development of a healthy and productive human being as the ultimate ethical goal.

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