

On Erich Fromm's Virtue Ethics

Yicheng He*, Peter Gan Chong Beng & Na Zhang

School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author: heyc2021@student.usm.my

Received: 23 May 2022

Accepted: 13 June 2023

Abstract: Fromm's ethics can be viewed as a form of virtue ethics, which emphasizes the importance of developing one's true self and reducing one's false self. By doing so, one can change their psychological state in terms of character and psychological tendencies, leading to an improved moral life and higher moral standards. While some criticisms have been raised about virtue theory, including its perceived inability to guide one on how to act properly, Fromm's virtue ethics is unique in that it does not focus on establishing universal rules for specific actions. Instead, it seeks to establish universal laws for human behavioural tendencies or trends. Through his unique social psychology, Fromm provides an in-depth analysis of the inner world of man, which can serve as a valuable guide to the general direction of human development and freedom. In addition, Fromm's virtue ethics also highlights the importance of social relationships and the impact they have on our moral development. He argues that our relationships with others can have a profound effect on our psychological state and our ability to live virtuously. Overall, Fromm's virtue ethics provides a unique perspective on human development and morality. By focusing on the development of one's true self and the importance of social relationships, his approach offers a valuable guide to living a fulfilling and virtuous life.

Keywords: Erich Fromm; moral guidance; true self; pseudo self; virtue ethics

Introduction

Erich Fromm, who is a well-known psychoanalyst and an outstanding ethicist in the 20th century, creatively introduces sociology and historical materialism into the domain of psychology, establishing the humanistic psychoanalysis which is aimed at improving human creativity and achieving human freedom. He published a large number of writings, such as *Escape From Freedom*, *Man for Himself*, *The Art of loving*, *To Have Or To Be?* Remarkably, the most popular book written by him is *The Art of loving*, which has a significant effect on the world. Lawrence Friedman (2013), who published an important writing about the life of Fromm, said that "Fromm's 1956 volume, *The Art of Loving*, has sold more than twenty-five million copies globally and is a favorite of my Harvard undergraduates today as it was with my classmates at the University of California half a century ago." He (Friedman, 2013) also mentioned that the deepest Fromm's book is *Escape from Freedom*, which was also the best-seller several decades ago.

In this paper, I argue that Fromm's ethics is essentially a "virtue ethics", and that it has unique theoretical qualities. It is different from both traditional deontology and utilitarianism, and from "virtue ethics" in the general sense. It combines the theoretical essence of psychoanalysis and Marxism, and deeply analyzes the psychological mechanisms in people's inner subconscious, while not neglecting the shaping of people by their social environment. The core concept of this "virtue ethics" is the "universal man", which is a state in which the unconscious world of human beings is released from repression, liberated and freed as much as possible. It is the highest virtue of man. I will then argue in detail that the "universal man" is a state of

perfection in which the subconscious mind is transformed back into consciousness, or a virtue. Moreover, this ethics of virtue, with “universal man” as its core concept, has the function of a moral guidance and can give people a universal standard for judging good and evil or specific actions.

Methodology

This study employs a philosophical approach to analyze Erich Fromm’s virtue ethics, which is based on the integration of key concepts from ethics and psychoanalysis. The study draws on the works of Fromm, as well as relevant scholars in ethics and psychoanalysis, to provide a theoretical framework for the analysis. The study uses a combination of close reading and interpretation of Fromm’s works, as well as analysis of relevant secondary literature, to identify the key concepts and themes that underpin Fromm’s virtue ethics. To identify relevant literature, a systematic literature review was conducted using electronic databases, including PhilPapers, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, as well as a manual search of relevant journals and books. The criteria for selecting literature included relevance to the study’s research questions, quality of methodology, and importance in the field. The analysis is based on an examination of the key concepts in Fromm’s virtue ethics, including the role of true self, pseudo self, and virtue, as well as the relationship between psychological activities and virtues.

Findings and Discussion

1. The Virtue of The True Self

The question whether Fromm’s view of ethics is a virtue ethics seems to have received little attention. If virtue ethics is understood as an ethical theory that rivals others such as deontology and consequentialism in assessing the morality of actions (Tiwald, 2010), then some commentators (Chong, 2006) would maintain that Fromm’s discourses on morality, cannot be classified as a virtue ethics as he was not even aware of such rival theories, or his ethics does not completely separate virtues from the rules, nor separate virtues from duty to be distinct enough to warrant the name of virtue ethics. For example, in *Man for Himself* he refers to what he calls “objective ethics”, and he criticizes extreme subjectivism, arguing that it contradicts the notion that ethical norms must be universalized and adapted to the needs of the masses, and that in the vision of humanistic ethical thought is “the applied science of the ‘art of living’ based upon the theoretical ‘science of man’”. The good is synonymous with being good for people. Such a view can easily be seen as normative or consequentialist.

On the contrary, if “virtue ethics” were more loosely defined as an ethics that emphasizes the dispositions, character, motivation and virtues of the agent for evaluating morality, in short, an ethics that focuses on the agent’s exemplary excellence, (Slote, 2000), then there could be interpreters who agree that Fromm’s ethics is a virtue ethics. I will next argue this one point in detail. In Fromm’s view, the “self” is the driving force behind human action, and the main mission of life is to grow the self into a state consistent with its potential. This is because man has to face a problem of existence. As Fromm (2001) said, “its existence confronts man with a problem which is essentially human: by being aware of himself as distinct from nature and other people, by being aware-even very dimly-of death, sickness, ageing, he necessarily feels his insignificance and smallness in comparison with the universe and all others who are not “he”. The most important result of life’s struggle is one’s own self (Fromm, 2013). The “self” can be divided into “Real self” and “Pseudo Self” in different contexts.

Real self refers to a combination of thoughts, feelings, and psychological tendencies that are not generated by external anonymous authority, pressure, or self-suggestions and are in accordance with the person’s true will, intentions, or motives, while pseudo self is disguised as thoughts, feelings, or intentions that are motivated by the real self due to certain psychological mechanisms (Fromm, 1941). In *Escape From Freedom*, he elaborated several psychological mechanisms for the creation of the false self, which he called “Mechanisms of Escape”. There are three mechanisms: Authoritarianism, Destructiveness, and Automaton Conformity. The first mechanism is to make a person give up the tendency of self-independence and let the self become one with someone or something outside of oneself in order to gain the power that the personal

self lacks; the second mechanism is to eliminate the personal sense of insignificance and powerlessness by abusing or destroying an external object; the third mechanism is to make a person mold himself into that kind of person according to the personality model provided by a certain society and culture, so as to make himself become like everyone else (Fromm, 1941). One of these three mechanisms may affect a person under certain conditions, or perhaps all three mechanisms simultaneously shape the development of the human self.

Erich Fromm is not just describing a “psychological fact”, he is proposing a “norm” with a micro-psychological perspective, i.e., the person “had to” develop their true selves and “ought to” escape the repression of their true selves by their false selves. When he explained his faith about the development of man, he said, “In the same sense we can have faith in ourselves not in the constancy of our opinions, but in our basic orientation to life, the matrix of our character structure. Such faith is conditioned by the experience of self, by our capacity to say ‘I’ legitimately, by the sense of our identity.” (Fromm, 1968) From his view, one would believe that there is the possibility to develop his own self and there is the responsibility to do it.

If one may make his own self developed well, this can be called the “virtue of the true self”. This virtue of the true self is manifested in several ways. First, the existence of the true self is universal, and every person of sound mind has a true self, and the existence of the true self transcends history and civilization, regardless of the age or culture, and the existence of the true self should be universalized, and a society should have the foundation and conditions for the development of the true self; second, the existence of the true self is certain, and the “true” for the self is not only an attribute of existence, but also a “virtue”, the true self can make people feel love, freedom and happiness, the false self will only make people fall into anxiety, depression and pain, let the true nature of the self be manifested or expanded, is also a virtue; third, the universality of the true self is not only the basis of the existence of the true self, but also the embodiment of the universality of man; the existence of the true self is not only because of its basis as a “universal man”, but also because only after the development of the true self can the “universality” of man be fully realized.

These characteristics are stemmed from the existential and historical dichotomies of man, which is proposed by Fromm. He (2013) deems that the unique condition of human existence is resulted from the emergence of reason. According to Fromm, reason is “both a blessing and a curse”, as it creates an insurmountable dichotomy within human nature. Unlike other organisms, humans exist in a state of constant disequilibrium, facing the challenge of solving an existential problem. Humans are unable to return to a prehuman state of harmony with nature and must instead develop their reason to master nature and themselves. The inherent dynamism of human history is driven by this dichotomy, pushing humans to seek new solutions and create a world where they can feel at home with themselves and others. This ongoing quest for knowledge and understanding stems from the contradictions within human existence. As eternal wanderers, humans are compelled to fill the gaps in their knowledge and account for the meaning of their existence. Fromm suggests that this existential split within human nature leads to various dichotomies, driving humans to search for a new kind of harmony that can reunite them with nature, their fellow humans, and themselves (Fromm, 2013). Thus, one’s true self is bound to exist and is needed to be developed.

In contrast to some classical views of virtue, the “true self” is a general abstraction of various specific virtues. For example, Plato (2004) proposed “wisdom”, “courage”, “temperance”, and “justice” which are all concrete virtues (In addition to these virtues, human beings can also have such virtues as “compassion”, “kindness”, “tolerance”, “love”, and so on. And countless other virtues can be enumerated. In this way, it is not clear which virtues are more important or which virtues need to be given more attention, and this can lead to confusion as to which virtues should be selected as the criteria for the development of moral character. In addition, such an enumeration of virtues ignores the question of “the determination of virtues”, i.e., how can one observe through one’s behavior that one does possess such or such virtues? Some people who show so-called bravery may only pretend to be brave for the sake of gain, but in fact they do not possess the corresponding virtue; others may show charity only to gain reputation in order to achieve his other purposes, but not for the sake of doing good to others. In contrast, to observe whether a person has the virtue of “true self”, it is necessary to observe not only his external behavior, but also his deeper psychological motivation, and to observe the change of his psychological state in different situations, so as to determine whether he is indeed acting out of true self.

Meanwhile, the intrinsic properties and virtues of the true self in Fromm's theory, the true self is a unique and distinctive being. From the point of view of the transformation of the unconscious into consciousness, the virtue of the true self is actually the virtue of the transformation of the unconscious into consciousness. In *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*, Fromm mentioned the goal of psychoanalysis and proposed the process of the transformation of the unconscious into consciousness. He said, "The most characteristic element in the psychoanalytic approach is, without any doubt, its attempt to make the unconscious conscious—or, to put it in Freud's words, to transform Id into Ego." (Fromm, 2013) "The attempt to make the unconscious conscious" implies that the value of some parts of the unconscious is higher than something conscious, because "what is in our consciousness is 'false consciousness' and that it is essentially society that fills us with these fictitious and unreal notions." (2013, p. 26-27) So, for the true notions, ideas, wills and emotions, one is responsible to embrace the uncovering of repression of the unconscious. If one can make the unconscious conscious well, his actions and related characters can be regarded as the virtues. Even though many parts and contents of the human unconscious are repressed, it is possible to release the repressed parts of the unconscious and making them fully conscious. And then, these conditions of man occurring, means that a man has realized the condition of "universal man" (Fromm, 2013).

Fromm's theory of virtue emphasizes the close correlation between psychology and ethics. He (2013) said, "Psychoanalysis, in an attempt to establish psychology as a natural science, made the mistake of divorcing psychology from problems of philosophy and ethics." This is because a person's behavior must be viewed or interpreted as a whole, and the moral attributes and values behind a person's behavior must not be overlooked (Fromm, 2013). I deem that Fromm believes that one's behavior cannot be based on a purely physical vision, or a reductionist perspective. There is always one or another sort of value behind a person doing something and not doing another, and people choosing one of them also implies conceptual and psychological approval of that thing or related practice. And this thing may be a moral choice or moral behavior, and the psychological motivation and psychological mechanism behind it is precisely of a moral or value nature. As to how to apply this theory of Fromm's virtue to discuss the rightness or wrongness of an act, if it is used as a kind of moral guide, is the next question to be discussed.

2. The Approach of Moral Guidance

The failure of virtue ethics to provide moral guidelines for exactly how one ought *to act rightly* instead of how one ought *to be rightly* has become a tired argument. Ramon Das (Besser-Jones & Slote, 2015) in an article *Virtue Ethics and Right Action: A Critique* summarized several problems that virtue ethics has to be confronted with. He deems that it is inescapable to consider how one's act even though "virtue ethics takes as theoretically basic an agent's internal states of character or motive", and Das (2015) believes that this is because "any plausible account of how a person should act must take into account features of the external world, notably including the act's foreseeable consequences". In other words, it seems that one has to consider some person's specific action or behavior if one would apply some points of virtue ethics to some moral problems. Then, this could force one to turn back the method of deontology or utilitarianism where the virtue ethics prepares to deal with a moral choice or moral problem. Meanwhile, Das (2015) mentioned that, "Experience teaches that people occasionally act out of character. Sometimes, good people do the wrong thing and bad people do the right thing." It seems difficult to utilize virtue ethics to judge what the right thing ought to do through inner character or motive. The moral attributes of some behavior might be ambiguous and intractable so that one could not make a moral judgment appropriately. By extension, Fromm's virtue ethics is bound to encounter the same problem. Next, I will discuss in detail how Fromm's virtue ethics will solve this problem.

First, Fromm's virtue ethics focuses on tendencies or dispositions to behavior and can be said to provide a moral guide to behavioral dispositions rather than a moral guide to specific behaviors. For Fromm's virtue ethics, a universalist normative view similar to deontology or utilitarianism cannot be required of his virtue ethics. His ethics sees man as a whole, a particular being with transcendence, not similar to behaviorist psychology's reduction of man to physical activity, nor to neuropsychology's reduction of man's mental activity to physical activity. His theory of character explicitly introduces the concepts of "unproductive character" and "productive character". The fundamental basis of his theory of character is not the various

types of Libido but the particular type of social relations between human beings and the outside world. He (Fromm, 2013) pointed out that “character can be defined as the (relatively permanent) form in which human energy is canalized in the process of assimilation and socialization.” Unproductive character refers to mental connections and mental patterns with others or the outside world that are essentially pseudo-self-driven and lack the capacity for creativity or love, while productive character is the opposite. Productive orientation behind Productive character refers to a basic attitude of positive mental, emotional, and feeling responses to other people, to oneself, and to everything. Fromm (2013) states that “Productiveness is man’s ability to use his powers and to realize the potentiality inherent in him.”

In particular, he sees man’s shaping of his good character or the pursuit of mental health as consistent with the goal of pursuing virtue. Speaking about Freud’s theory of personality, he (2013) said, “Normal growth, however, will produce the mature, independent, productive character, capable of loving and of working; in the last analysis, then, to Freud health and virtue are the same.”(In fact, although Fromm is referring to Freud’s theory of character here, he has actually developed his own unique theory of character.) He (2013) argued that the shaping of one’s character and the pursuit of virtue are the same, and that the development of one’s character to the extreme is when one’s virtue is at its best. For his ethics, a person belonging to unproductive character may also behave in conformity with the basic moral rules of society in terms of external behavior, but in terms of value ordering, a person of this character lacks vitality, is not sufficiently developed to realize his inner potential, and is also psychologically motivated to violate reason and true self, and is likely to make wrong value so that they may make wrong value judgments and moral choices. It is more important to give a direction for character development than to give general moral rules or moral guidelines for specific individual actions or behaviors. This is because it determines the direction of the development of one’s being, the direction of one’s life, and one’s perception of ethical life. If a person is able to develop his or her productive character, then he or she will be able to set his or her human attitude right both psychologically motivated and cognitively, to accept the requirements of his or her conscience, to make the right moral judgments as much as possible, and to deal with human relations well, doing the right thing at the right time under the right conditions.

Secondly, Fromm’s ethics of virtue and rule ethics (deontology and utilitarianism) are not parallel or antagonistic, but complementary. It is not that his ethics does not emphasize the role of norms or rules; in fact he explicitly rejects a subjectivist view of ethics. He (2013, p. 21) says, “Must we then give up objectivity if we choose humanism? Or is it possible to establish norms of conduct and value judgments which are objectively valid for all men and yet postulated by man himself and not by an authority transcending him? I believe, indeed, that this is possible and shall attempt now to demonstrate this possibility.” The universal ethics refers to the norms of conduct the aim of which is the growth and unfolding of man; whereas socially immanent ethics refers to such norms as are necessary for the functioning and survival of a specific kind of society universal ethics may be found in socially immanent ethics, for example in such public norms as “love thy neighbour as thyself” or “thou shalt not kill” (Fromm, 2013). However, socially immanent ethics may be inconsistent with universal ethics to the extent that it suppresses one’s true self and thus results in the mere maintenance of socially indicated stability, but in fact deprives one of freedom. Fromm (2013) mentions that “One calls those who want happiness for themselves ‘selfish’ and those who want to retain their privileges, ‘responsibly.’ Submission, on the other hand, is glorified as the virtue of ‘unselfishness’ and ‘devotion’.” Fromm argues that social ethics and universal ethics have always been in conflict historically, but are getting better with time for the better, and that the improvement of the former is an aid and guarantee to the development of human virtue, thus ensuring the improvement of the virtue of society as a whole. In short, the value of Fromm’s virtue ethics lies in establishing the wholeness of the human person, respecting his or her inner potential and believing in his or her purposefulness, rather than judging the ethical nature solely through specific, piecemeal actions.

Actually, Fromm’s virtue ethics can serve as an important supplement and reference to help us fully consider the individual’s true needs and intrinsic values in moral decision making. By focusing on the development and autonomy of the true self, we can better balance individual interests and social responsibilities, and achieve individual spiritual growth and moral improvement. As Fromm (2013) said, “Our

moral problem is man's indifference to himself. It lies in the fact that we have lost the sense of the significance and uniqueness of the individual, that we have made ourselves into instruments for purposes outside ourselves, that we experience and treat ourselves as commodities, and that our own powers have become alienated from ourselves." This implies that Fromm sees the development of the human self as the top priority and the state of the person's own being with the self as the key to developing oneself. Only by fully bringing the virtue of the self to its fullest can one ensure that one is morally perfect and leads a relatively good moral life.

Conclusion

Fromm's virtue ethics, based on his unique social psychology, is a virtue ethics with "productive character" as its core and "universal man" as its goal. His virtue ethics is not about providing universal moral rules for specific behaviors, but about providing universal moral laws for behavioral tendencies or trends. His virtue ethics has the characteristics of universalist normative ethics, but it also penetrates into the inner world of man and provides valuable guidance for people's moral life.

Acknowledgement: We would like to express our gratitude to our main supervisor, Peter Gan Chong Beng, for his invaluable guidance and support throughout this research project. We would also like to thank our friends who contributed to the research or manuscript but are not listed as authors. Their insights and assistance greatly enhanced the quality of this work.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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