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The concepts of *total humanity* and *being mode* in the reception of Fromm by Romano Biancoli

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Romano Biancoli and the foundation of the Istituto Erich Fromm

When I met Romano Biancoli he was the Director of the IPA (Istituto di Psicoterapia Analitica) in Bologna. I was in training as a psychoanalyst at that Institute. In February 1988 he suggested to some analysts, myself included, to found a new Institute and to name it “Erich Fromm”. I remember asking him why he wanted it so named. Briefly, this was his answer. “We (referring to the seven founding members) are not orthodox psychoanalysts. We do not believe that human behavior is motivated by drives. Rather, we believe that it is motivated by our need to enter into a relation with others. This need is rooted in our human nature. It is this need which impels us to act. Fromm is the only psychoanalyst who has a global, anthropophilical vision of human beings, based on the innate needs of our life conditions. Fromm then investigated the human psyche in terms of the social character structure. We can understand our patients in terms of the socioeconomic and sociocultural environment to which they were socialized. Real human needs are rooted in human nature, but alienated society elicits pseudo needs.”

This answer reveals how congenial Fromm’s thinking and clinical practice were for Romano. Romano, as we all know, had a thorough knowledge of Fromm’s thinking. He appreciated and admired Fromm’s depth and radical human-

ism. He himself had a remarkable humanistic and lay culture, and shared Fromm’s lay view of psychoanalysis. As regards the depth of Fromm’s thinking, I remember he once said that the fact that Fromm expressed his concepts in plain language which was accessible to all did not at all imply that they were not deep. At all times, great thinkers have always expressed themselves in language readily understandable by most people.

Romano became the Director of the Institute and I the Secretary. For many years we were in close touch. I may say that I knew him very well. The new Institute needed to grow, to get known, both at a national and an international level. It also needed to be recognized as a training school in psychoanalysis. We finally obtained this recognition in 2000. We also dedicated ourselves to establishing international connections with the IEFS (International Erich Fromm Society), the IFPS (International Federation of Psychoanalytic Societies), the Sandor Ferenczi Society, the Karen Horney Society. At a national level, the Istituto was one of the co-founders of OPIFER. An important contribution came from Jorge Silva-Garcia, a pupil of Fromm’s, who came every year for about ten years for individual and group supervision. Another contribution came from Marco Bacciagaluppi, who prepared the training program for our pupils, conducted several theoretical and clinical seminars in the Istituto and gave much good advice.



Romano wrote and published many papers on Fromm's thinking and clinical work. We took part together in many meetings, some organized by the Istituto in cooperation with the International Erich Fromm Society. We presented several papers at these meetings. In this paper I shall discuss two contributions by Romano. The first was presented in 1997 and is titled *The Idea of Whole Man, Total Humanity, and Its Clinical Applications* (Biancoli, 1997). The other was presented in 2005 and is titled *The Search for Identity in the Being Mode* (Biancoli, 2006). Having shared these experiences with him, I chose to speak of these contributions because in them he discusses some Frommian themes very dear to him and theoretically very important. I shall present the main points discussed by Romano, I shall comment on them, and establish connections with my own papers presented at the same meetings.

I have three preliminary points to make clear. (1) Romano does not present any clinical cases in either paper, but he suggests clinical applications of the concepts he discusses. (2) I use the terms "Self" and "I" interchangeably. (3) I apologize for the traditional use of the masculine gender.

The concept of *Total Humanity*

In the paper presented in 1997 in Ascona (Switzerland) at a meeting on "Erich Fromm – Psychoanalyst and Supervisor", Romano discusses an important Frommian concept, that of *total humanity*. He claims that, although human beings live in different sociocultural contexts, there is always a human common denominator: the indisputable fact that all human beings share the same psychophysical structure (Biancoli, 1997, p. 1). From a radical humanistic position he is critical of the social constructivist position which maintains the relativity of human nature. This position claims that it is not possible to separate individuals from the specific sociocultural contexts to which they were socialized and to derive universal laws on human nature. Romano points out that this premise coincides with the Frommian concepts of *social character* and *frame of orientation and devotion*. Marx distin-

guishes between *human nature in general* and *human nature historically modified*. The constructivists, instead, do not recognize *human totality* and do not share Fromm's claim (Fromm, 1947) that human beings are not a blank sheet on which culture can write any text. According to Fromm, human beings, by adapting to various external circumstances, are structured in certain ways (Biancoli, 1997, p. 2).

Romano goes on to say that Romanticism and the Enlightenment have different positions on this dual aspect of man. Romanticism stresses the cultural aspects. The Enlightenment, by stressing the universal aspects, agrees with Fromm's radical humanism, according to which every human being represents the *totality* of our species. According to Romano, Fromm views the unconscious as the *totality of human potentialities*, namely as all that a human being is capable of doing, thinking and feeling. In a word, as *total man*. Fromm also stresses the universal symbols which appear in dreams (Fromm, 1951). He views them as reflecting fundamental experiences common to all mankind. He also points out that the themes to which they refer are at times so universal that they no longer appear as human products, although radical humanism continues to ascribe them to human beings (Biancoli, 1997, p. 3).

The clinical applications of the concept of *Total Humanity*

As regards the clinical application of this concept, Romano states that emotional communication in the analytic dyad is possible because analyst and analysand share the fundamental characteristics of the human species and share the same contradictions. Both potentially share the totality of human experience (Fromm, 1960). "The experience of one could have been the experience of the other" (Biancoli, 1997, p. 5). Therapy is the interaction of two *globalities*. Romano shares Fromm's recommendation to address the totality of the patient and his experience, and not to fragment this experience in many different problems to be examined separately. The analyst in the radical humanistic position does not consider the patient as a subject



with a problem to solve but should examine the function which that problem has in the total personality. Every information which the patient provides should enable us to understand his totality as a human being. The analyst should favour *center-to-center* listening (Fromm, 1960; Biancoli, 1995). Only by placing himself at the center of the patient and feeling what the patient feels can the analyst see the patient's total functioning.

In connection with the center-to-center listening suggested by Fromm I presented at the same meeting a paper on *Fromm's Therapeutic Approach: a Modern Model for an Empathic and Authentic Analytic Relationship*. In it I pointed out that, as regards the approach to the patient, Fromm followed on the path opened up by Ferenczi (1932). Ferenczi was the first to realize that the analyst's detached attitude prescribed by Freud (1912, p. 536) not only did not lead to a positive therapeutic outcome but, on the contrary, was harmful and retraumatizing for the patient. I also pointed out that Fromm (1960) had gone beyond Sullivan's concept of the participant observer (Sullivan, 1940). This concept still implied being outside another person. According to Fromm, instead, "the knowledge of another person requires being inside of him, to be him ... in this center-to-center relatedness, lies one of the essential conditions for psychoanalytic understanding and cure" (p. 66). Fromm himself describes this situation as paradoxical. The analyst must be at the same time himself and the patient. Through this mode of communication analyst and patient analyze and cure each other mutually. I also pointed out that this modern concept is entirely foreign to classical psychoanalysis, which does not admit what for many analysts (e.g. Searles, 1975; Sandler, 1976; Langs, 1978) is now obvious, namely that the patient is the means by which we gain access to our countertransference and thus becomes our analyst and supervisor.

I go back to Romano's paper for one last point. The concept of transference, according to Fromm, concerns all aspects of social life. It is the strategy which a person adopts in order to survive (Fromm, 1968). Romano adds that also transference is a function of the total personality. The aim of humanistic psychoanalysis is to

change the patient's inner orientation from passivity to activity, from the having mode to the being mode. A successful analysis should attenuate, or eliminate, the deep need to depend on omnipotent persons or institutions (idols) (Biancoli, 1997, p. 6).

The search for true identity in the *Being Mode* according to Romano Biancoli

Romano was fascinated by Fromm's book *To Have or to Be?* (Fromm, 1976). He regarded it as Fromm's most mature work. It was the work he quoted most often, both in seminars and in supervision. It is thus not surprising that in Magliaso (Switzerland), for the 20th anniversary of the foundation of the IEF5, he presented a paper on *The Search for Identity in the Being Mode*. The being mode is here viewed as the patient's experience in analysis of who he really is. Romano follows Adam Schaff (1960, cited in Biancoli, 2006, p. 2), who found in Marx's early work the forerunners of ideas which were completely developed in later works. Similarly, Romano stresses in his discussion of Fromm his later concepts of *having mode* and *being mode*, as presented in his penultimate book. As regards Fromm's contribution to psychoanalytic theory, Romano compares it to that made by Ferenczi. Both psychoanalysts were not closed in "school sectarianism" (Biancoli, 2006, p. 4) but viewed psychoanalytic theories as "a live and pulsating body in permanent ferment and development" (Biancoli, 2006, *ibid.*). These brief citations are sufficient to show that, although Romano had the idea of giving the Istituto the name "Erich Fromm", he nonetheless had a syncretic view of psychoanalysis (to use a term for which I am indebted to Marco Bacciagaluppi). Fromm, however, was his preferred author, and he kept referring to his theoretical and clinical thinking, both in therapy and in supervision. I was a direct witness, since Romano was at first my analyst and then my supervisor. Ours was thus a father-son relationship. I summarize a passage in which he clearly states his position. Romano says that a psychoanalyst who refers to Fromm disclaims membership in any psychoanalytic school and rejects any doctrine which claims to



give certainty. He points out that Fromm was against any “party line” in psychoanalysis. He therefore never founded a school of his own. He also never wrote a book on psychoanalytic technique. His pupils, e.g. Rainer Funk, Jorge Silva-Garcia, Ruth Lesser, report that Fromm feared his teaching could be experienced as dogma (Biancoli, op. cit., p. 4).

As regards identity, Romano rejects the views of Erikson (1963, cited in Biancoli, 2006, p. 5) and Kohut (1971, Biancoli, ibid.). He felt these authors only dealt with pseudo-identity. He refers instead to Fromm’s concept of identity (Fromm, 1941). He found this was similar to that of Winnicott (1960). Both distinguish a true self from a false self. I agree on this with Romano, as I stress in my paper on *The Relevance of Fromm’s Concept of Alienation to my Clinical Practice*, which I presented at the same meeting. As Marco Bacciagaluppi (2010, p. 3) points out, Fromm, Winnicott and Bowlby “are three authors who have in common a caregiving attitude towards the child”, and Romano, by quoting them, reveals his affinity with them.

According to Fromm (1941), it is the parents who, as agents of society, suffocate the child’s spontaneity and independence. Thus, the child, in complying with their expectations, replaces his self with a pseudo self. Through this loss of identity the child avoids the panic which he would experience if he did not conform to the parents’ expectations and did not obtain their approval and recognition. This is what Fromm says: “Since the child does not know who he is, at least the others will know – if he acts according to their expectation; if they know, he will know too, if he only takes their word for it” (Fromm, op. cit., p. 206).

In Winnicott this production of a false self in the child is described in detail. From the very first months of life, in order to conform to the expectations of the parents, and especially of the mother, the child gives up his spontaneous wishes and needs and separates from his true self. This situation inevitably gives rise to a fragmentation of the child’s experience, which does not coincide with the mother’s experience of him. A split thus occurs between the true and the false self. The function of the false self is to conceal from the mother the original kernel of

the child’s spontaneous needs. The child no longer wishes to reveal them. Past experience has taught him that the mother does not accept them. The penalty for revealing them is his annihilation.

According to Fromm and Winnicott, a false identity is created as a reaction to the external environment, and therefore as a defence. In my paper I write: “a puppet self, a smoke screen to hide and protect the intimate and inviolable nucleus of his/her true self. But this comes at the expense of his own authenticity and the price to pay is alienation from the self” (Lio, 2006, p. 2).

I pointed out that the child, having learned the lesson once and for all, will tend to maintain this false self also as an adult, at least until he meets someone who will unconditionally accept the spontaneous expression of his authentic self. I added that this meeting may, and actually should, occur in the analytic relationship. If the analyst really wishes to know the patient’s reality he should create an atmosphere of acceptance of, and deep respect for, the patient. Only on this condition, by feeling protected in a secure base, to use Bowlby’s expression (1988), will the patient feel impelled to reclaim his true identity.

Going back to Romano’s paper, he agrees with Fromm’s claim (1979) that there is a genetic uniqueness. Romano, following Fromm, thinks that therapy should succeed in reconstructing a picture of the child’s character when it was born, in order to distinguish it from the present character traits due to its modification by the environment. According to Romano, this rediscovery of the unalienated identity is possible if analysis is carried out in the being mode. It is this mode which “gives back the intimate problematic nature of the relationship between individuation process and identity” (Biancoli, op. cit., p. 3). In my opinion, Romano bases this claim on the discussion by Fromm (1976) of the etymology of the term ‘to be’. “Being in its etymological root is thus more than a statement of identity between subject and attribute ... It denotes the reality of existence of who or what is; it states his/her/its authenticity and truth. Stating that somebody or something is refers to the person’s or thing’s essence, not to his/her/its appearance” (p. 33).



Romano agrees with Fromm's statement that being is in contrast to appearing. Being refers to a person's true nature. Fromm (1968) makes a distinction between 'ego', which belongs to the having mode, and 'I', which is the center of activity and belongs to the being mode. Romano rightly states that, if the aim of the analytic process is to establish who the analysand *is*, the 'I' can only emerge in the being mode (Biancoli, 2006, p. 5).

Romano points out that the analyst's ego could make an accurate description of the patient and work out interpretations and reconstructions. The patient, however, would feel that his true self has not been reached. It is not possible to describe and/or possess a person as if the person were a thing. The knowledge of self would become a fetish if it were experienced as possession. Since the I is elusive, it is possible to speak of it only metaphorically. The identity which is discovered may only be experienced. The relationship in the analytic dyad is organized by the analyst's emotional approach much more than by any interpretation. And the analyst, by knowing himself better, also promotes his own process of individuation (Biancoli, op. cit., p. 6)

Conclusion

Since this meeting is dedicated to the memory of Romano Biancoli, it seems fit to close my contribution by quoting the ending of his 1997 paper. I do this for two reasons. On the one hand, this quote conveys the degree of Romano's interest in and enthusiasm for Fromm's thinking. On the other, it is a way of making Romano's presence felt once more among us.

"Radical humanism is biophilic. The love of life is the feeling that everything is in movement, that everything is being born. ... Psychoanalytic treatment that is not inspired by biophilia may gather information and impose interpretations and reconstructions but it is unlikely to capture the living, pulsating unity of a person's total humanity. ... Radical humanism asks that psychoanalysis be biophilic and therefore an art, that it go to the 'centre' of the patient, always seeing his or her whole

being, and offering the whole being of the analyst, and that it see the human root of everything. ... Humanism is the civilisation of listening, of comparison, of dialogue. It is for this reason that it finds one of its most suitable expressions in the relationship between analyst and patient" (Biancoli, 1997, p. 8)

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