

# The Pathology of Normalcy, by E. Fromm

## a. People / Organizations:

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## b. Quotes:

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## c. General Notes:

### ▪ Chapter 1 - Modern Man's Pathology of Normalcy (pg. 15)

- "...from the standpoint of any existing society, one can hardly see how it could fail to take this attitude, because a society of a specific structure can exist only insofar as its members adopt an attitude that guarantees more or less smooth functioning of this society. One of the great efforts which every society makes, in its cultural institutions, educational institutions, religious ideas, and so on, is to create a type of personality that wants to do what he or she has to do; which is not only willing but eager to fulfill that role which is required in that society, so that it can function smoothly." (pg. 19)

- "This structure is, after all, not the result of some arbitrary choice, but is rooted in a great number of objective historic conditions, in which the society in question functions, and that cannot be changed so easily." (pg. 19)

- "You might say, every functioning society has a vested, legitimate interest, in a certain amount of conformity, an interest from the standpoint of the survival of this society, which has to satisfy its own structure and social individuality. This expectation of conforming is stressed in life. Certainly there is no need for me, in the year 1953, to stress conformity. But maybe what needs to be stressed a little more is that the survival of the society, at least of modern society, is also based on the fact of nonconformity. If a society of cave dwellers existed on the basis of complete conformity, we still would be living in caves quite obviously, and we would still be cannibals." (pg. 20)

- "One might say that the development of humankind depends on the fact that there is a certain willingness to conform, and a certain willingness - eagerness - not to conform; and that, not only for the development of progress but indeed for the survival of any society of the human race, **the willingness not to conform is as essential to the society itself as a certain willingness to conform**, and to adjust to the rules in which this society plays the game of life." (pg. 20)

- "On the other extreme is the patriotic approach, which says the American way of life is all that can be wished for. It is the best that ever existed and there are no questions to be asked. That is a rather primitive standpoint which does not show much thought, and I am afraid not even much concern, because I don't see any reason why it should be a kind of virtue to think my country is wonderful when we all think it is not a virtue to say I am wonderful." (pg. 21)

- "It is an expression of real egocentrism, and the same lack of concern, if one is satisfied to make these statements without enquiring about what is wrong and being concerned with it." (pg. 22)

- "The first principle of the modern Western world is that an individual emerges from a group to which he belongs in a fixed and prescribed manner and has to live and to fit more himself, that he emerges as an individual and is not anymore a member of a static society, as the feudal society of the Middle Ages was for many centuries. This is, in a sense, what we call the individualism or freedom of modern man, as against the fixed position, the static position of Medieval man who was primarily a member of a group and by the very nature of this structure never ceased to be a member of this group. Modern man has emerged from these primary ties, from these original structures. But—and I shall add a but to all of these points that I am trying to make now—he is afraid of the freedom he has achieved. He is not a member of an organic group anymore, but he has become an automaton who then, in a secondary fashion, holds onto society, to convention, to public opinion, to all sorts of groupings, because he doesn't know what to do with his freedom. He cannot stand it to be alone and free from these earlier ties in which his place was given and determined by society. Another feature of modern Western society, closely related to that of the emerging of the individual from this collective organization of society, is what is usually called individual initiative. Let us say in the Medieval guild the member of the guild was dependent in his economic activity on the guild. In modern capitalist society people are free. The capitalist is free. The worker is free. They strike out for themselves and they develop each, what one calls individual initiative. However, with all that individual initiative, which was so pronounced in the 19th century, we live actually in a culture in which people have less and less individual initiative; that is to say, they may have individual initiative in an economic sense, but even that is much less than it used to be a hundred years ago because of certain changes in the structure of modern capitalism. But if you question what the individual initiative is in anything else besides how to invest your money, it is indeed very little if we get down to the point. Perhaps people in the Medieval world had as much or more individual initiative, if we refer by that to the surprise of living, to taking life as an adventure, to making something out of it, to differ a little bit from "my neighbor." I say that probably people in most cultures have more individual initiative than we have. I think individual initiative in a human sense, as differentiated from a purely economic one, is at a low ebb in modern man. The third feature, characteristic of modern society, is that we have created a science and an activity that have permitted us to combat, to master nature to an unheard-of degree—which is all perfectly true. But we—the proud people who started out to dominate nature—have become slaves of the very economic machine that we created in the process. We dominated nature, but our machine dominates us. We are perhaps more dominated by the artifacts we have created with our machines, than in many cultures people are dominated by nature which they have not learned to master. At least if you consider the danger of earthquakes or a flood, which are perils of nature, and to compare these dangers with the risk of an atomic attack or war, then I think that it is a symbol of how we are threatened by our own production in a way much more than cultures that are dominated by nature. The fourth characteristic of modern culture is its scientific approach. By scientific approach I mean something that goes far beyond the technical sense of what is a scientific approach. **The scientific approach, humanly speaking, is an ability to be objective, that is to say to have the humility to see the world as it is, or other people, other things, and ourselves, and not to distort the reality by our wishes and our feelings: to have faith in the power of our thought for recognizing the truth, the reality, but to be willing all the time to change the results of our thinking by new data that we find, and by being honest and objective in not avoiding data that we might find in order to avoid changing our own picture**. The modern scientific approach is, I would say, humanly speaking, one of the greatest steps in human progress since it signifies the expression of a spirit of humility, objectivity, realism, which does not in the same degree and in the same manner exist in those cultures in which the scientific approach does not exist. But what have we done with it? We are now worshipers of science and have made scientific statement the substitute for old religious dogmas. The scientific approach is for us not at all an expression of that humility or objectivity, but it is just another formulation of a dogma. The average person believes that the scientist is a priest that knows all the answers and that is in direct touch with all that he wants to know, just as some people are satisfied that the priest, if he is in touch with God, if he can see Him once in a while, feels that he has some part in this communication with God. So if you read Popular Science and know the latest discoveries, and are convinced that there are scientists who know all the answers, you participate in this new dogma, the religion of science, and you never have to do any thinking for yourself. Another feature of contemporary civilization of the last two-hundred years is our political democracy, also a tremendous step forward. It means that people can decide not only about how their taxes are used, but also about all important issues in society. They can decide for themselves. But again you might say this idea and this principle, which originally was a reaction to the principle of the absolute state or even the feudal state, wherein people had no right to participate in the decisions about their own lives, has deteriorated in many ways, if I would use a very

strong expression, to betting on the racetrack, with all the excitement, all the risk-taking, all the irrational elements that number three might be the right horse because I dreamed it last night. While I don't deny there is a certain amount of rationality in our voting process on the whole it cannot be described as a thoughtful concern of individuals in the affairs of society. I still think it is better than anything else we have, but certainly it is far from what was originally formulated. You might ask, "Is there something common to all these new factors in modern society as I tried to describe them, namely that they have to be understood, in the first place as negations of the premodern structure?" **Individual freedom, individual enterprise, the scientific approach, political democracy, the domination of nature, all these are primarily expressed in terms of negation. It is the opposite. It is different.** It is a negation of those points in the feudal structure. But I am afraid we are getting stuck with a negation that we still formulate and conceive of these ideas in terms of a negation that was new two-or three-hundred years ago, rather than to come to a new level of discourse, to, if you please, a negation of the negation, a critical appraisal of what this negation means; or you might say, that we go beyond the negation and come to new, more positive formulations of what we want. Because after all, feudalism, or even the absolute state, is not our problem anymore. While an editorial of the New York Times may have been the most revealing and heartening and suggestive document a hundred years ago, I cannot find that in 1953 the editorials have this effect on me, and I don't think that they have this effect on anyone else except perhaps of confirming what he or she thinks, which is always a nice and pleasant experience. On the whole I think if we consider the positive features of our culture and our society, we should recognize that we are still stuck in the negations that it is a little late for that. It is a long time since the negation really was fruitful and constructive, and we should arrive from the negation to a new level, which is either the negation of the negation, or you might formulate it, as let us say, a new position." (pg. 22-25)

- "[T]here is an amount of secret boredom going on in this kind of life that leads to explosive results in terms of mental health. We speak so often of the evils of life: sickness, mental illness, alcoholism, what not, but **I think we are not sufficiently aware that one of the worst sufferings in life is boredom and that people go to any lengths and any effort, not to avoid it because that is not too easy, but to escape it, to cover it up.**" (pg. 26)
- "The human situation is characterized by profound dichotomies and contradictions. The most basic one—the one of the limitation of our existence which in the last analysis is expressed by the necessity of death—has to do with the fact that we are part of the animal world in our whole physiological organization, and at the same time, are free of the animal world, that we belong to it, are in it, and in the same time, don't belong to it. We have reason and imagination which permit us and almost force us to be aware of ourselves as distinct, separate entities, and of our end which is unavoidable, and which is the very opposite of life. We are confronted with these contradictions in our existence, and we have to make some sense of our life. We just cannot stand living, merely eating and drinking and not making sense. We have to give some answer to the problem of living and we have to give some answers theoretically and practically. By this I mean that we need a frame of reference in which we orient ourselves in life, which makes the process of living and our position in it somehow sensible and meaningful. Unless we are crazy, or unless we repress, as some people do, and many people can do it almost completely, the awareness of the problems of existence by following compulsively a routine of escape, we are bothered with the question of the meaning of life and we need some frame of reference and orientation, which makes sense. This is not only an intellectual frame of reference, but we need also an organizing principle of an object of devotion, of something to which we devote our energies beyond those which we need for producing and reproducing." (pg. 26-27)
  - "Religion in this broad sense of the definition—as need for a system of orientation—is something peculiar to all humans in one form or another. I should like to add, the choice is not at all between religion or no religion, provided we use the term in this general sense. The choice is only between a good religion and a bad religion, or a better religion or a worse. Or to put it differently, we are all "idealists": we are prompted by motives that go beyond our self-interest. This idealism" is the greatest blessing, but it is also the greatest curse. There is hardly anything men have ever done harmful to the world, which has not been done out of sheer idealism - "idealism" again defined now not in terms of any specific context, but of those strivings transcending beyond the routine task of continuing our life and of surviving, and of creating a frame of reference and an object of devotion that transcends our biological survival. To say that somebody is "an idealist," as an excuse, is just stupid. We all are. The only question is what are our ideals. Are we driven by the wish to destroy, to dominate, to control, to strangle life, which is just as much "idealism" psychologically speaking, in this sense of my definition, as it would be if we are driven by a wish for love and cooperation?" (pg. 29)
- "What I mean to say is that the aim of life, which corresponds to the nature of man in his situation of existence, is to be able to love, to be able to use one's reason, and to be able to have the objectivity and humility to be in touch with a reality outside of oneself, inside of oneself, without leading to distortion. This type of relatedness to the world is the greatest source of energy beyond that produced by the chemistry of the body. There is nothing more conducive to creating anything than love as far as it is genuine. Being in touch with reality, doing away with fiction, having the humility and objectivity to see what is, and not talk about things that separate us from reality, is the most essential basis for any sense of security, for any sense of feeling "I" without needing props which substitute for that feeling of identity." (pg. 30)
- "There is a good deal of necessity for routine, for being concerned with the humdrum in life, with what is really not important, and yet which is very important from the standpoint of our survival as individuals and as groups. But at the same time routine has the great danger for man because with this routine, which in itself is rooted in one aspect of ourselves, namely our animal aspect, in the need to eat and drink, this same routine tends to cover up, to paralyze and eventually to kill, what is our spiritual side, what is the most important thing in life, namely, if you don't mind my saying so, our soul, our experience of love, of thought, of beauty. There is in every individual life, and in every culture you might say, a struggle and conflict between that part of life and that part of a culture that is routine, and that part touching on the basic human experience." (pg. 33)
  - "The only ritual which we really have, is the ritual of competition between two men, or between two groups of men, and that is the ritual meaning of our interest in baseball, football, and in a presidential election. There is a real problem. There are some of the basic facts of life, two men fighting. But really, it can by no means be compared to the depth of the problem that you find even in the bullfight, since it is really one of the simple, crude problems of life: that two men are fighting, and one is going to win." (pg. 34)
- "One form of our contemporary religion is the worship of a specific idol—the idol of production per se. The problem one-hundred years ago was more the problem that we did not produce for use, but for profit, that the profit motive was the essential one. Today, the problem is not anymore so much production for profit, but production for nothing, the production of everything, because **production in itself has become a god**, has become an end in itself, and people are simply fascinated by the act of production, as in religious cultures they would be fascinated by religious symbols. We, all living in that culture, don't see that being fascinated by the act of production is a religious attitude. We find it quite natural since it is not phrased in religious terms, because when we speak of religion we speak about Christianity or Judaism, we speak about the cross or ritual. Therefore, in our conscious minds, we don't call it religion when we are so fascinated by serving this machinery of production. If you take modern man, this is one part of the frame of reference in which he lives, and one of the religious objects of devotion to which he dedicates his life, that things are bigger and better, that there is more and more. Quite **parallel to that, is the problem of consumption.** Obviously we consume in order to have pleasure. We eat something because it tastes good, or we have a house because it is nice, and we want to live in it. There is a very realistic point in consumption, namely to serve our needs, and to serve our pleasures. But it seems to me, just as production has become an aim in itself, consumption has become an aim in itself. We are fascinated by the idea of buying things, without much reference to how useful they are. This is one of the psychological factors on which our economy is based. It is furthered and stimulated by the advertising people, who make a business out of applying this knowledge to the practical question, how to sell their product to consumers." (pg. 40)
  - "This attitude of buying, this religious expectation that there are endless things that we can get, and the almost orgiastic pleasure in visualizing the wealth of new things you can buy, this is something that carries over in our attitude toward things other than new models. We have become

consumers of everything, consumers of science, consumers of art, consumers of lectures, consumers of love, and the attitude is always the same. I pay and I get something, and I am entitled to get it. I do not have to make any spatial great effort because it is always the same problem of exchange of things that I buy and things that I get. This same attitude of the consumer, in a sense, you find in many parallel phenomena, in people's experience toward art, toward science, toward love, as what they experience when they buy the latest model. In fact, that is the way one gets married. It has a great deal to do with the latest model as we see it, which is the most successful one. The one which, to attain, seems to be very appealing and a proof of one's value." (pg. 41)

- "Life is something in which sadness and pain are as essential a part of being alive as happiness." (pg. 43)
- "The aim of psychic development is to be able to tolerate insecurity, because if one has any sense on this planet, we are in every way insecure, not because of the atom bomb, but because of the whole way we exist. **We are insecure physically, we are insecure mentally and spiritually.** We know almost nothing compared with what we ought to know. We try to live in a sensible way with almost no information about how to do it. We risk not so much our physical life, but our spiritual life, almost every minute." (pg. 45)
- "I should like to speak about what seems to me to be **the central problem of mental health: self-alienation, that is, the alienation from ourselves**, from our own feelings, from people and from nature; or, to put it still differently, the alienation between ourselves and the world inside and outside of ourselves." (pg. 46)
  - "In our system a process happens for which I should like to coin a word, provided it doesn't already exist, namely the process of abstractification. Forgive me this coinage, but I find it useful. By abstractification I mean to make something abstract rather than to leave it as it is concretely. We are accustomed, by the way we produce, by the way our economy functions, to experience in the first place, things in their abstract forms, rather than their concrete forms. We relate ourselves to them in terms of the exchange value, rather than in terms of their use value." (pg. 49)
    - "People do not only sell their physical power, their skill, their brain, being hired for one or the other purpose, but in our culture they sell also their personalities, that is to say, they have to be pleasant, they have to have the right background, if possible, they have to have kids in order to make them respectable." (pg. 51)
- "So far I wanted to give a description of what seems to me **one of the essential features and dangers in man in contemporary society, namely that we have become out of touch with all realities except one, that is the manmade reality of business, of organization of things we can manipulate.** We are in contact with artifacts. We are in contact with social routine, and we are in contact and refer to what produces more things, but we are not in contact with the basic realities of human existence. We are not in contact with our feelings, with what is really our feeling, with our happiness, unhappiness, our fear and doubt, and all the things that go on in a human being. We are not in contact with our fellow man or nature. We are only in contact with a small segment of the world created by ourselves, and actually we are deeply afraid of touching anything deeper." (pg. 55)
  - "Instead of being related, being in touch with love, with hate, with fear, with doubt, with all of the basic experiences of humans, we all are rather detached. We are related to an abstraction, which is to say we are not related at all. We live in a vacuum and fill the vacuum, fill the gap with words, with abstract signs of values, with routine, which helps us out from the embarrassment." (pg. 56-57)
  - "Joy, energy, happiness, all this depends on the degree to which we are related, to which we are concerned, and that is to say, to which we are in touch with the reality of our feelings, with the reality of other people, and not to experience them as abstractions which we can look at like the commodities at the market; and secondly, in this process of being related, we experience ourselves as entities, as I who is related to the world. **I become one with the world in my relatedness to the world**, but I also experience myself as a self, as an individuality, as something unique, because in this process of relatedness, I am at the same time the subject of this activity, of this process, of relating myself. I am I and I am the other person. I become one with the object of my concern, but in this process, I experience myself also as a subject." (pg. 58-59)
- "To sum up: **the general picture of our modern culture is one of a mode of production and consumption centering around the market, centering around mass production. That in itself is an abstractification and one of the great steps of progress in the development of economy. But at this point this method of production, this method of abstractification, has reached such proportions that it affects not only the technical sphere, but that all participants have been molded by it, that all experiences inside and outside of ourselves become abstract as commodities become in the market. We are unrelated to real experience, we are in a vacuum, we are therefore insecure, we are therefore in danger of boredom, and we are therefore in a very serious situation of mental health, which we only overcome by a routine in which we do not have to face our boredom and the emptiness of our relationship to others and to ourselves, and the abstract quality of our experiences.**" (pg. 63)
  - "I was talking last time about what I called the alienation from oneself, from other people, from things, and the connection of this process of alienation with what I call the abstractification, that attitude which is characteristic for our modern industrial capitalist culture. In this culture we experience things, people, the self, not in their concrete form, not in their use value, but in their abstract form, one of which is money, another of which is words, and to relate ourselves to these abstractions rather than to what is real and concrete." (pg. 63)
    - "By intelligence, I mean an ability to manipulate concepts, but not to penetrate through the surface to the essence of things, to manipulate rather than to understand. This faculty of understanding, one might call reason, in contradistinction to manipulating intelligence. Reason indeed operates only if we are related to what we think about. If we are unrelated to it, then we can do nothing but to manipulate. We can weigh and count and figure and compare factors. You might say this kind of intelligence has the very same character of abstractification which our feeling and our sensing has. Reason might be a luxury sometimes, but sometimes the life of individuals and the life of humankind may depend on the ability to use reason in a penetrating sense and not only to use it in the sense of manipulation of purely intellectual, superficial thought process that never penetrate to anything and therefore never change anything." (pg. 65)
      - ◆ "They believe that scientific thinking gives what religion used to give a few hundred years ago: namely, complete certainty. They cannot tolerate uncertainty. For them, science has become a new religion, a new certainty about facts of life, which gives them the sense of security that in another age religion was to give. The average person has become the consumer of science. He expects that the scientist knows it all; and that by reading the newspaper, he has about the same position as the man who goes to church. The priests are the specialists for handling relationships with God. For some people, it is enough that they exist. You can see them from time to time, and I think in the contemporary attitude toward science, you find something very similar. People are convinced that they are the high priests of science who have complete certainty about the world. As long as they teach at universities, and the newspapers write about them, everything is all right. There is somebody at least who has certainty and conviction, and one feels a sense of security oneself. What one really means by scientific approach, both the layman and the social scientist, is essentially something that is done by manipulating intelligence." (pg. 65)
- "**Totalitarianism has created a new pagan religion, regressing far behind the beginnings of Christianity, in which we find a mixture of hero worship, worship of work, fear, terror, all that mixed together into a frightful system of a pagan religion.**" (pg. 68)
- "There is a distinction between the way in which a society is organized, its production is organized, its work is organized, and the way people are. I believe that certain basic and fundamental changes are necessary in order to give humankind the possibility for a more human individual existence: but I believe also that we must begin with ourselves. If one talks about politics and social change without beginning to examine one's own attitude, without changing something in oneself, then all of this is rather idle talk or dangerous because what one aims at, which one wishes to produce is not related to an inner experience. Hence one cannot decide whether such a change is good or bad." (pg. 78)

- Chapter 2 - The Concept of Mental Health (pg. 81)
  - "There are basically two concepts of mental health. First, one might call the society-oriented one; and one I would call the man-oriented one—or to use another more familiar and more traditional word, a humanistic concept of mental health. The society-oriented concept of mental health means that man is healthy if he can fulfill the functions that society gives him, if he can function according to the needs of any given society." (pg. 81)
  - "I should like to start out by saying that I believe that, perhaps, one of the greatest discoveries of Freud was precisely the discovery of this concept of narcissism, and that there is probably no entity that is more significant and more basic in the production of mental illness than narcissism. And, I would say that if I were forced to define mental health just in one sentence, I would say that mental health consists in the minimum of narcissism. But I shall try to be a little bit more concrete about it. Freud means by narcissism an attitude in which what is subjective, my own feelings, my physical needs, my other needs, have a great deal more reality than what is objective, than what is outside. The clearest example for it, of course, is to be found in the infant, especially in the newborn infant, and in the psychotic person. In the newborn infant there is no reality except the inner reality of needs. To a certain extent the outer world does not even exist, in terms of conceiving it. The same holds true for a psychotic person. Psychosis is—if one wants to give it a general definition—precisely the complete narcissism with the almost complete absence of relatedness to the world, objectively, as it is. In between the infant and the psychotic are we, the so-called normal people, and as Freud has already observed, narcissism plays a considerable role in all of us, more or less." (pg. 86-87)
  - "It is clear that the alienated man is frightened, and that he is dependent on the object - things, gadgets, commodities, bureaucracies, the state, leaders, caciques - there are many, many forms, but all have the same function of giving man a full sense of identity. Because he is in touch with himself only by surrendering to some great power, or great figure, or great institution, which gives him the illusion that he is in touch with his own powers." (pg. 93-94)
  - "**The individual is precisely the frozen expression of the past and even of the future**" (pg. 98)
- Chapter 3 - The Humanistic Science of Man (pg. 101)
  - "Firstly, the study of man must be based on certain humane concerns, primarily those which have been the concern of the whole humanistic religious and philosophical tradition: the idea of the dignity of man and of his potentialities for love and reason, which can be actualized under favorable circumstances. Secondly, the study of man must be based on those concerns which result from our own historical situation: the breakdown of our traditional value system, the uncontrolled and unstructured growth of purely intellectual and technical activities, and the resulting need to find a new, rational foundation for the establishment of the values of the humanistic tradition. These concerns assume that in spite of all differences man is one species, not only biologically and physiologically but also mentally and psychologically. These general aims can be accomplished only if methods proper to the study of man are examined and developed. The problem is not that of choosing between a scientific and a non-scientific study of man, but of determining what constitutes the proper rational method for the understanding of man and what does not. A humanistic science of man must continue the work of the great students of man of the past, such as Aristotle and Spinoza. It will be enriched by the new data that biology, physiology, and sociology are giving us, and by our own experiences as contemporaries in this age of transition who are concerned with the future of man." (pg. 103)
- Chapter 4 - Is Man Lazy by Nature (pg. 109)
  - See text

d. Further Readings:

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