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Democratic Ethics and the Role of Social Psychoanalysis for Melioristic  
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Democratic Ethics and the Role of Social Psychoanalysis for Melioristic Social Science

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## 1. Introduction

- 1 “Keep you doped with religion, and sex, and TV // And you think you’re so clever and classless and free // But you’re still fucking peasants as far as I can see.” So goes the fourth verse of John Lennon’s *Working Class Hero*. The song can be seen as a popular expression of reflections on the theme of voluntary servitude and the effects of ideology. This verse in particular, along with the refrain line “A working class hero is something to be” and the appeal “If you want to be a hero well just follow me” at the song’s end, convey a sarcastic attitude towards the paradoxical consent of the masses to their living conditions. The paradox lies in the self-oppression of working-class people who willingly endorse the circumstances that make their lives unfree.
- 2 Compare with these lyrics Fenichel (1981), who in 1938 addresses the Germans’ desire to “let themselves be charmed”<sup>1</sup> by a leader (1981: 1063). In accordance with Lennon, Fenichel writes:

Now, one can try to secure the dependence of the dependent by even trying to establish an inner consent of the dependent with their dependence. [...] Under certain social conditions this succeeds completely: The serf peasant was certainly terribly miserable under the feudal lord; but he was nevertheless economically secure and looked upon them like a little child looks upon its mother. (*Ibid.*: 1068)
- 3 Although the addressees of Lennon’s song and Fenichel’s article are different, and so is the historical and socioeconomic context, it is easy to recognize the common theme, namely the observation that large groups of people show a relative contentment with their living conditions – maybe even sympathizing with the authorities on whom they depend –, though there are evident factors that interfere with their autonomous living. Classic authors of the psychoanalytic tradition such as Fenichel, but also Reich (Rosen 1996: 15-8), Fromm and others, took up the theme of voluntary servitude, but in a way

that departed from its originator, presumably La Boétie (1998).<sup>2</sup> La Boétie expressed his surprise about the fact that people let themselves be governed by tyrants, even though the power of the tyrant depends on the willing submission of the masses. Erich Fromm and John Dewey, as will be shown, give a specific account of voluntary servitude in their interpretations of the genetic factors of the world wars.

- 4 In this article, I will trace a common thread in the works of Fromm and Dewey to make the case for the value of further elaborating melioristic social science in the spirit of these authors' ethical theories. My argument goes like this: Fromm and Dewey discussed the quality of collective habits, and both did so in order to explain why the Germans' characters had been shaped in a way so that they willingly consented to authoritarian, militaristic regimes, and their ideologies (Dewey focusing on WWI, Fromm on WWII). Section 2 thus argues that Fromm (1965) and Dewey (MW.8) share the same "defense mechanism" as the major explanation of the Germans' tendency towards (voluntary) submission. Here, for both authors, the concept of powerlessness, the collective incapability of making use of the available freedoms, plays an explanatory role. This powerlessness, in short, led to a kind of regression manifesting itself in voluntary submission. Starting from this line of argument, section 3 will consider the ethics involved in their works, showing that Fromm's and Dewey's ethics can be read as aiming at overcoming *communicative* powerlessness, where "communicative" is to be understood in terms of an ethical relatedness towards the world. In section 4, I will then outline how the concept of powerlessness and the ethical vision can help elaborate melioristic social science that aims to foster democracy as a way of life. The proposed kind of melioristic social science attempts to overcome communicative powerlessness in service of the ideal of democracy as a way of life.

## 2. Escaping from Freedom

- 5 To ease the argumentative burden of bringing Fromm and Dewey together, I draw on Morita (2022), who has pointed out the ways in which Fromm's social psychoanalytic work can be fruitful for Dewey's ethical project of a living democracy, in particular for democratic education and the role of the emancipatory teacher, on which Morita focuses (2022: 469; cf. also Monchinski 2008). Apart from the exceptions mentioned, it is rarely addressed that Fromm read numerous writings of Dewey and quotes Dewey in systematically important passages of his work (e.g., Fromm 1965: 19-20; 1971: 25-32).
- 6 In his most detailed reference to Dewey, Fromm discusses Dewey in the form of a demarcation from and appreciation of his ethics (Fromm 1971: 25-32). The demarcation is twofold. First, Fromm criticizes Dewey for holding that we can have knowledge of ends only if the means to achieve them are made mentally concrete, thereby neglecting the fact that we can gain knowledge about (desirable) ends through philosophical-anthropological and psychological studies (*ibid.*: 29-30). At the same time, Fromm states, Dewey believes that ethics is directly influenced by insights from anthropology and psychology, insofar as we need knowledge about human psychological needs. It seems to me that Dewey's philosophy at least provides the conceptual tools to construct a science-based, i.e., fallible, account of human needs.<sup>3</sup> Discussion of this criticism, however, requires deeper study than is possible within the scope of this paper. The second point is Fromm's claim that the conceptual tools provided by the psychoanalytical tradition allow for a more precise conceptualization of unconscious

motivation than Dewey's account of habits. This seems adequate to me. While Dewey's concept of character is clearly dynamic and holistic, character being understood as an interpenetration of habits (MW.14: 29), as is the Freudian understanding of the character (Fromm 1971: 31-3), it remains rudimentary compared to a scientific psychological account. Yet, I argue that both criticisms should be taken as a starting point to explore the complementary parts of Fromm's and Dewey's thought that might support each other. As a result, Fromm's psychoanalytic account of character can be seen as an invaluable source for the further development of Dewey's ethics, while Fromm can be safeguarded from venturing into essentialist and context-neglecting terrain.

- 7 With a different focus than Morita (2022), this section highlights the similarities between the social philosophies of Dewey and Fromm at the time of the world wars to make their complementarity explicit. Their World War genealogies<sup>4</sup> (MW.8; Fromm 1965)<sup>5</sup> share the same defense mechanism as the major explanation of the Germans' tendency towards voluntary submission, which involves a strong "feeling of powerlessness" (Fromm 2019; cf. also Fenichel 1981: 1063). It should be noted at the outset that this is not a defense of Fromm's and Dewey's World War genealogies per se. However, I argue that important parts of the explanation, especially the connection of powerlessness, internalized authority, and voluntary submission in relation to the social character or collective habits of groups (exemplified by the Germans) provide instructive conceptual tools for a normative social philosophy and melioristic social research.
- 8 Dewey's explanation of the Germans' tendency towards submission is in principle an explanation of the same kind as Fromm's and can thus be considered psychoanalytic, at least in terms of Fromm's version of psychoanalysis. The notion of defense mechanisms is crucial in psychoanalysis and in part it became common knowledge, especially some particular defense mechanisms such as repression. As is known, what characterizes defense mechanisms is that they help overcome unbearable inner-psychic tensions and thus bring a benefit. Yet, they come at the price of neurotic symptom formation in case the conflicts at stake are too strong or the ego does not have the capacity to cope with them (Gerlach 2014: 68). Fromm (1965) aims to identify the defense mechanisms that led masses of Germans to submit to the Nazi regime, considering also "normal," i.e., non-neurotic, people (cf. the mild form of a sadomasochistic orientation found in people who seek a "magic helper"; 1965: 196-201; cf. 2019: 313).
- 9 Fromm highlights a particular form of escaping from freedom that is typical of persons with an authoritarian character to explain the surrender of the Germans to the Nazi regime. For Fromm, the authoritarian character<sup>6</sup> (including the "receptive character"; cf. Fromm & Maccoby 2017) is a type that the social character can assume. "Social character" is an innovative concept Fromm developed in the 1930s and first presented in greater detail in the Appendix to *Escape from Freedom* (cf. Funk 1998). "The social character," Fromm states, "comprises only a selection of traits, *the essential nucleus of the character structure of most members of a group which has developed as the result of the basic experiences and mode of life common to that group*" (Fromm 1965: 304-5). It is, however, not to be understood statistically but functionally: "[I]t is the social character's function to mold and channel human energy within a given society for the purpose of the continued functioning of this society" (Fromm 2002: 77). Social character is shaped by socioeconomic circumstances as well as ideological factors,

where the economic circumstances have a special weight since they are the factor that is the hardest to change (cf. *ibid.*: 78-9; analyzed in detail in Funk 1982: 16-22). For example, modern industrial society depends on the development of a social character that includes discipline, punctuality, orderliness of the workers<sup>7</sup> (Fromm 2002: 77-8). Based on historical analysis (1965), empirical work (Fromm & Maccoby 2017 and the posthumously published works on the character of German laborers between the World Wars from the 1930s), and clinical experience, Fromm developed a typology of the social character and distinguished two basic orientations: the productive and the non-productive orientation. The latter distinction will be addressed in the next section, since it is ethically relevant. I will now attempt to account for the defense mechanism of the authoritarian character by outlining three important argumentative steps (2.1-2.3), also referring to passages from Dewey that account for the similarity of their arguments.

## 2.1. Powerlessness as a Mark of the Authoritarian Orientation of the Social Character

- 10 Fromm's phrase "escape from freedom" denotes a phenomenon of human behavior, namely a will (conscious or unconscious) to submission, that can be hard to explain. This phenomenon has been addressed 460 years ago by La Boétie. La Boétie observes the striking fact that millions of people endure a single tyrant who possesses no more power than that which they give him (1998: 191-2). Moreover, La Boétie assumes that no one is a servant by nature and, in turn, that in order to let oneself be subjected, one "must either be constrained or deceived" (*ibid.*: 200). Fromm holds to the interdependence of ruler and ruled, but on a psychological level, and rejects what has been asserted "[f]rom Hobbes to Hitler," namely that the human "wish for domination [i]s the logical result of the biologically conditioned struggle for survival of the fittest" (Fromm 1965: 168-9). Indeed, masochism is a human phenomenon (albeit one that involves only unhappy "voluntary submission"), but its occurrence and strength, like that of sadism, depends on cultural and socioeconomic circumstances. What we need in order to account for this voluntary submission is a social psychoanalytic explanation.
- 11 Fromm's notion of the authoritarian character takes up the phenomena of sadism and masochism. With the authoritarian character, there is always a sadistic or a masochistic striving, where sadistically oriented people want to dominate themselves and others and are exploitative in the appropriation of goods; those with a masochistic striving deny themselves in their relations with others and submit to them. They show a receptive attitude in the appropriation of goods and want to receive everything (IEFS 1995: 30). Both of these strivings "are regularly to be found in the same kind of characters," where "[s]adistic tendencies for obvious reasons are usually less conscious and more rationalized" (Fromm 1965: 165-6; cf. 1971: 108). Any social relationships that the authoritarian character (also in milder, more widespread forms) establishes are symbiotic. By "symbiotic," Fromm means an interdependence that marks the social relationships of individuals with such a character. A submissive individual depends (psychologically) on someone strong or some power, just as the sadistic individual depends on those who submit to them (1965: 165-7).

- 12 To understand Fromm's view of the "powerlessness" (e.g., *ibid.*: 45-54) and "aloneness" (*ibid.*: 34) of the authoritarian character, we must account for how they relate to the dialectics of freedom and the conditions under which they arise.
- 13 What is the dialectics of freedom involved here? Fromm writes:
- Freedom, though it has brought him [modern man] independence and rationality, has made him isolated and, thereby, anxious and powerless. This isolation is unbearable and the alternative [sic!] he is confronted with are either to escape from the burden of his freedom into new dependencies and submission, or to advance to the full realization of positive freedom which is based upon the uniqueness and individuality of man. (Fromm 1965: viii; cf. also 2002: 230)
- 14 Individuals with an authoritarian character typically suffer from strong feelings of aloneness and powerlessness *because* they attained freedom and rationality in the sense of negative freedoms, freedoms from, (e.g., Fromm 1965: 97) while at the same time they assume a form of social character that makes them incapable (with variations in degree from person to person and also over the course of a lifetime, assuming a minimum capacity for self-transformation) of realizing positive freedom. The tragedy Fromm points out is that persons born under conditions that foster the emergence of the authoritarian orientation of the social character<sup>8</sup> suffer from freedom they do have – and due to the social character's inertia (Fromm & Maccoby 2017: 216, 236) will continue to do so or suffer even more after a system change has occurred, as in the case of Mexican peasants decades after the Mexican revolution of 1910-1920 (*ibid.*: 32-7).
- 15 Importantly Fromm's analysis directly links the new economic conditions at the time of the Reformation with Luther's doctrines and argues that the combination of both brought forth a feeling of powerlessness in the lower and middle classes that shaped German culture for centuries. Fromm writes, "[t]he individual had lost the security of certainty and was threatened by new economic forces, by capitalists and monopolies; the corporative principle was being replaced by competition; the lower classes felt the pressure of growing exploitation" (Fromm 1965: 98). The lower classes, suffering under growing exploitation, lent their allegiance to Luther, who, however, supported them only to a limited extent so as not to lose the sympathy of the middle class, which had a strong interest in maintaining law and order to secure its relative privileges over the poorer masses: "But when they attack the authorities he approves of, an intense hatred and contempt for the masses comes to the fore" – a typical trait of authoritarian character, as Fromm notes (*ibid.*: 102). Its privileges being limited, the new capitalist economy was a threat for the middle class: "As a whole, the middle class was more endangered by the collapse of the feudal order and by rising capitalism than it was helped" (*ibid.*: 99).
- 16 How did Luther's doctrine contribute to a feeling of powerlessness that sedimented itself in German culture? Fromm writes:
- Luther's solution is one which we find present in many individuals today, who do not think in theological terms: namely to find certainty by elimination of the isolated individual self, by becoming an instrument in the hands of an overwhelmingly strong power outside of the individual. For Luther this power was God and in unqualified submission he sought certainty. (*Ibid.*: 96-7)
- 17 Moreover, Luther's picture of the human being "mirrored just this dilemma [of the middle class]. The human being is free *from* all ties binding him to spiritual authorities, but this very freedom leaves him alone and anxious, overwhelms him with a feeling of his own individual insignificance and powerlessness" (*ibid.*: 99). In this passage the

parallel between Dewey and Fromm becomes evident. Fromm describes a vicious combination in Luther's thought that individuals are free from the listed ties while feeling endangered by and powerless in the face of the new living conditions described above. In conclusion, freedom became "a burden and danger" (*ibid.*: 93), something to be escaped.

- 18 This freedom *from* expresses the kind of lack of orientation that Dewey calls "pure formalism" (MW.8: 163) in the inner, moral sphere. Dewey shares Fromm's view that in order to understand German intellectual history, we should "go back at least to Luther" (*ibid.*: 146). By showing the link between Luther's doctrines and the socioeconomic conditions at the time of their emergence, Dewey complements Fromm's illustration by giving exemplary quotes that account for the impact of Luther's thought, e.g., from Heine (*ibid.*: 146, 175-80), the historian Von Sybel (1890: 35-8; MW.8: 177-8), and by linking it to Kant's philosophy and its impact. "In protestant Germany his [Kant's] name is almost always associated with that of Luther" (MW.8: 146-7). What Dewey's depiction lacks is the consideration of powerlessness and how Luther's doctrines, besides the new socioeconomic conditions, fostered powerlessness in the lower and middle classes. As the next subsection will show, this is the starting point for a line of argument in Fromm that sheds light on Dewey's text, especially Dewey's argument that German philosophy's combination of an empty formalism in ethics with the strong feeling of duty and obedience in the external "world where men's acts take place" was a causal factor in the emergence of WWI (cf. *ibid.*: 163).

## 2.2. Dualism in German Culture Before and Around the World Wars

- 19 For Dewey, theories, be they theological, common sense, or scientific, in their authentic, misunderstood, or intentionally distorted form, themselves have effects and can reinforce dualisms (MW.8: 139-42, 152). Doctrines, ideas, ideologies certainly have effects. Furthermore, dualisms in general express social divisions (MW.9: 128-9, 343). With regard to the assumption of an inner realm, typical of German culture before the world wars, he writes:

To set up an external aim strengthens by reaction the false conception of culture which identifies it with something purely "inner." And the idea of perfecting an "inner" personality is a sure sign of social divisions. What is called inner is simply that which does not connect with others – which is not capable of free and full communication. (*Ibid.*: 129)

- 20 The dualism of an inner and outer realm, Dewey argues, is an expression of social divisions, but at the same time dualisms can harden or reinforce social divisions. What he earned a lot of criticism for was his thesis in *German Philosophy and Politics* that Kant's philosophy, especially the two-worlds doctrine, made a significant contribution to the emergence of WWI through its influence on the mind of the Germans (MW.8: 151-2).
- 21 Given the mixture of Marxian thought and the revised version of psychoanalysis (e.g., Fromm 2013), Fromm holds the same view in his discussion of the doctrines of the Reformation as introduced above focusing on Luther. What Fromm shows is that Luther's dualistic doctrine – dualistic because the inner free will is separated from the empirical world – "mirrored" the new situation of the middle class at that time, which in turn is shaped by its relations to the lower class as well as to the powerful few holding monopolies, thus by the social divisions Fromm sketches (1965: 96-102). That Fromm shares Dewey's view on dualisms is also evident in Fromm's *To Have or To Be*,

where he links what he calls the mode of existence *having* – characterized by a “relationship to the world [a]s one of possessing and owning, one in which I want to make everybody and everything, including myself, my property” (Fromm 2008: 21) – with dualistic separation and objectification, and, in turn, sees the wide dissemination and intensity of this mode as a consequence of modern capitalism that is reflected in every aspect of our lives.

- 22 Interestingly, both Fromm and Dewey argue that starting with the Reformation<sup>9</sup> and the influence of Luther and Calvin a theoretical dualism has been shaped that separates granted free will in the inner, spiritual realm from the realm of action, and thus from the influences of socioeconomic circumstances<sup>10</sup> and the workings of overt and anonymous authority. The amplifying effect of dualisms is pointed out by Fromm when he writes: “*The individualistic relationship to God was the psychological preparation for the individualistic character of man’s secular activities*” (1965: 129; italics in original). Luther (and Calvin, discussion of whom I must omit), the formulation further underscores, is to be seen as an important influence for the spread of the idea of inner freedom in German culture.
- 23 If inner freedom was part of the Germans’ self-understanding, how did it happen that submission was an option for free people? Fromm explains it with a “substitution of internalized authority for an external one” (*ibid.*: 189). External authority having lost importance due to the “political victories of the rising middle class,” conscience was seen as the essence of freedom and included the acceptance of the dominance of one’s nature by reason. This substitution happened, according to Fromm as well as Dewey, during “the development of modern thinking from Protestantism to Kant’s philosophy” (*ibid.*).
- 24 Internalized authority plays a crucial role in the further argument. Fromm’s concept of the authoritarian character can help elucidate Dewey’s claim that morally reprehensible content can become the content of duty and conscience, leading him to an account of Kantian ethics that is at least partly wrong (cf. Braun 2020). Dewey and Fromm agree that (morally) good action requires productive self-activity on the part of individuals (e.g., Fromm 1965: 288; cf. Dewey’s ideas of interpenetrating habits and consummatory activities), of whom those with an authoritarian character orientation, plagued by powerlessness, are incapable. The fact that the content of duties can be filled by those in power and perceived by individuals as their own is an expression of conformity and submission for the purpose of overcoming plaguing powerlessness.
- 25 Here Fromm’s further distinction between two forms of conscience becomes important. The distinction sheds light on the dualism in the Germans’ collective habits. The conscience of persons with an authoritarian character is primarily the authoritarian conscience, which Fromm distinguishes from the humanistic conscience (Fromm 1971: 143-72). Humanistic conscience is rooted in the individual’s active use of their powers and “*a re-action of ourselves to ourselves*” (*ibid.*: 159; cf. LW.7: 80, 287). Authoritarian conscience, according to Fromm, refers to the mentioned internalization of authority (e.g., of the parents, the state etc.) – what Freud called the Super-Ego (Fromm 1971: 144). Thus, external authorities become part of oneself and function “either consciously or unconsciously [...] as ethical and moral legislators” (*ibid.*). Fromm (1965), in his historical survey, describes the prevailing form of conscience from the Reformation up until the secularized rationalization of his day as distorted. He writes: “‘Conscience’ is a slave driver, put into man by himself. It drives him to act according to wishes and aims



which he *believes* to be his own, while they are actually the internalization of external social demands. It drives him with harshness and cruelty, forbidding him pleasure and happiness, making his whole life the atonement for some mysterious sin” (Fromm 1965: 118; cf. La Boétie 1998: 198).

- 26 Fromm’s statements about the authoritarian conscience underpin Dewey’s (MW.8) argument that “the gospel of a Duty devoid of content naturally lent itself to the consecration and idealization of such specific duties as the existing national order might prescribe” (MW.8: 164; cf. 429). While Fromm better accounts for the emergence and dissemination of the authoritarian conscience, Dewey’s diagnosis of the complete separation of the content of duty and the strong, cultivated sense of duty stresses the issue at stake. Dewey writes: “Concretely what the State commands is the congenial outer filling of a purely inner sense of duty” – and “the appropriate subject-matter lies in the commands of a superior” (*ibid.*: 164; cf. Braun 2020: 168-70; Fromm 2002: 95).
- 27 In the following subsection, I will elaborate on the regressive “solution” in face of the feeling of powerlessness and the dualism just described, leading to a gospel of duty devoid of content.

### 2.3. The “Solution”

- 28 Reviewing Dewey’s *German Philosophy and Politics*, Thilly states: “There is something uncanny, Professor Dewey thinks, in the scorn which German ethics pours upon a theory which takes account of practical motives. When an aggressive and commercial nation carries on commerce and war simply from the motive of obedience to duty, there is awakened an unpleasant suspicion of a suppressed ‘psychic complex’” (Thilly 1915: 541). Interestingly, Thilly mentions that a “suppressed ‘psychic complex’” plays a role in the background of Dewey’s argument. Although Dewey does not have the more sophisticated psychoanalytically informed theory that we find in Fromm, his account is reminiscent of psychoanalytic vocabulary. Duty, understood as self-imposed (MW.8: 163), and the effects of militaristic socialization (among other factors), which drills the individual to fulfill duty (whatever it is; cf. *ibid.*: 164), clash with the powerlessness of individuals. In his review of Santayana’s *Egotism in German Philosophy*, Dewey describes the effects of the above-mentioned dualism as follows:

[T]he German genius [...] is responsible for turning a sincere and wholesome interest in what is primitive, naïve, vital and unforced in experience into an unhappy egotism[.] Its very lack of the external conditions which alone would secure its expression in the arts of life has thrown it back upon itself for compensation in an undisciplined riot of theoretical and emotional self-assertion – which has in turn lent added practical power to the things against which that genius is in essential rebellion. (MW.10: 308)

- 29 Dewey’s choice of vocabulary in this passage is illuminating. A “compensation” was necessary, and the compensation resulted in a regression: the throwing back of the lack of external conditions (that correspond with the “pure formalism” discussed above). Dewey (MW.8) is primarily concerned with showing the pitfalls of the dualistic German thought by disclosing the real-world effects of it. Thus, psychological considerations like those we find in Fromm are much less present. Nevertheless, the quote, like Thilly’s remark, suggests that Dewey’s account corresponds to a psychological mechanism. The dualism embodied in the collective habits of the Germans led to an inner-psychic tension, which in turn led to the escape from freedom by following duty,

thus obeying internalized authority. In so doing, the individuals benefit from a relative mitigation of their feeling of powerlessness, we can complement with Fromm, since they (unconsciously) join the powerful state authority. At the same time, authoritarian conscience supports this mitigation, since internalized authority is substituted for one's moral judgment. Hence, the submission may appear voluntary on the level of consciousness and come with a regained feeling of power in the fulfillment of one's duty and being obedient. Escape from freedom through "voluntary" submission is a futile strategy to get rid of the causes of one's own powerlessness. Fromm writes:

We have seen that man cannot endure this negative freedom; that he tries to escape into new bondage which is to be a substitute for the primary bonds which he has given up. But these new bonds do not constitute real union with the world. He pays for the new security by giving up the integrity of his self. The factual dichotomy between him and these authorities does not disappear. They thwart and cripple his life even though consciously he may submit voluntarily. (Fromm 1965: 263)

- 30 Although the individuals feel more powerful again, they are fooling themselves about the autonomous nature of their decisions (cf. *ibid.*: 151; La Boétie 1998: 198). Unconsciously, powerlessness persists because the only proper way to overcome powerlessness is learning to use one's own powers (given the environmental constraints that need to be reshaped too). In addition, the dependency on authority persists and reproduces the individual's suffering.

### 3. Communicative Power(lessness)

- 31 I will now discuss powerlessness on a conceptual level and show how it is embedded in the ethical theories of Fromm and Dewey. In terms of both of their ethical theories, powerlessness – the above-mentioned lack of orientation and the feelings of powerlessness and aloneness that afflicted German people – can be understood as an incapability of relating to others and the world. They are tailored to overcome powerlessness in this sense (cf. Fromm 1965: 181). The following will show that their ethics contain an ethical understanding of communication, namely that communication is conceived of as a form of "ethical adaptation." Therefore, we can speak of communicative power(lessness). The peculiar communication-centeredness of Dewey's and Fromm's ethical vision needs to be explained. It must be pointed out at the outset that this concept of communication differs from what we normally understand by communication. Reflecting the latter, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* describes communication as "the exchange of meanings between individuals through a common system of symbols" (Gordon 2023). In Fromm's and Dewey's works we respectively find concepts of communication that consider communication first and foremost from the standpoint of ethics (and an account of philosophical anthropology). From their perspective, "communication" refers to the process of establishing relationships to others, the environment, as well as to oneself based on caring, responsibility, respect, and knowledge<sup>11</sup> (presupposing an interest in truth). Accordingly, I will elaborate first on this ethical concept of communication before considering what can be called a Frommian-Deweyan understanding of communicative power(lessness).

### 3.1. Communication as Ethical Adaptation

- 32 I will now show that the feeling of powerlessness is to be understood as *communicative* powerlessness. To this end, it must be clarified what the ethical concept of communication is in Dewey and Fromm.<sup>12</sup> I will focus on three salient features of this notion that overlap but should be distinguished to gain a better understanding: Creative adaptation (1.), involvement (2.), and artistic quality (3.).
- 33 1.) In Dewey's works, the concept of communication is closely related to his notion of the organism's continuous readjustment *of and to* the environment. According to Dewey, good action is not about conforming to a ready-made world, nor is it feasible to adhere to substantive teleological visions (MW.14: 11). Dewey understands good activity in terms of adaptation<sup>13</sup> insofar as it essentially involves bringing about a good relation to others, the environment, and oneself. In the context of Dewey's ethical theory, adaptation is not (only) a fitting to circumstances but a process that includes exploration of unknown and new factors – the process of determining a unique situation. Vices and virtues are “*working adaptations* of personal capacities with environing forces” (*ibid.*: 16; my emphasis). Conformism towards one's environment involves as much a bad form of passivity as adherence to fixed ideals and idols. In addition, Dewey emphasizes flexibility as a major character precondition of any person who is capable of this continuous readjustment (or growing; cf. MW.9: 46-58). Especially in today's capitalist societies flexibility has also acquired a negative meaning. Here, flexibility – paradoxically – takes the form of conforming to the socioeconomic conditions by which it is demanded and fostered. In this latter sense, flexibility is opposed to developing one's own personality and can have negative consequences.<sup>14</sup> However, in Dewey's sense, flexibility is opposed to conformism. In addition to the pitfalls of a shallow character, an overemphasis on flexibility in both Dewey's and Fromm's theories is to be avoided because good activity is understood holistically, i.e., habits should work in concert.
- 34 2.) This form of ethical adaptation includes not only good relationships to others but also the support from social institutions that in turn require participation and communication of individuals to be sustained and improved. That these links are present in Dewey's work is uncontested. However, Dewey didn't sufficiently explicate the concept of communication as employed in this connection. In *Democracy and Education*, we find an ethically highly demanding concept of communication. Not only is it through communication that community is constituted (MW.9: 7) but good communication is also educative insofar as any vivid dialogue requires mutual perspective taking in listening as well as in selecting one's words (*ibid.*: 8-9; cf. Fromm 2008: 28-9). Thus, it is clear that Dewey's concept of communication differs from the ordinary understandings as mentioned above. As is well known, Dewey then uses this understanding of communication in the criteria for judging whether social life is good in terms of representing a vivid democratic life (MW.9: 89-94). So we need to ask: Do individualized or collective habits or institutions foreclose good communication and shared practice, or do they foster them? At the same time these are Dewey's ethical criteria. As Pappas (2008) has highlighted, Dewey's ethics cannot be understood without considering his conception of democracy.
- 35 Good activity that establishes good relationships to others and the environment is marked by an encompassing active involvement of our capacities – think of Dewey's

notion of the “interpenetration of habits” (MW.14: 29; cf. also LW.7: 300) and Fromm’s notion of productiveness, which requires an active involvement of “the totality of a person’s thinking, feeling, and acting” (Fromm 2008: 21; cf. 1965: 184). Importantly, higher-order virtues that need to be cultivated assist this encompassing involvement. In Dewey, these are sympathy, open-mindedness etc. They are higher-order virtues insofar as their function is to improve inquiry and is not limited to specific contexts (Pappas 2008: 187-201; cf. the productive orientation in Fromm’s theory).

- 36 3.) An ideal form that communication, in the ethical sense of relating to others, nature and things, can assume is the loving and caring treatment of tools and materials or the subject-matter (e.g., of a novel) as we know it from art and crafts. In Dewey and Fromm, as in Heidegger (2001), we find considerations of art not so much in the sense of art criticism or a theory of perception but as a mode of relating to others, nature, and things. The ethical impact of this kind of thinking is crucial. In contemporary philosophy, it is common to make a clear distinction between the good and the right, between the pursuit of happiness and the norms of morality. Yet, in Dewey we find a theory of good activity in a broad sense, i.e., before such categorization, which exactly for that reason raises plenty of questions from the perspective of today’s moral philosophy (MW.14: 193-203). The same applies to Fromm’s conception of the productive character orientation (1971: 82-107), or later to “being” in contrast to “having” in the sense of two modes of existence (2008). Notably, Dewey, Fromm (and also Heidegger) make use of art, especially poetry, to illustrate that there is another mode of existence at play here and that it seems to be very important for a good, fulfilling life. A more detailed investigation is beyond the limits of this article. However, it should be pointed out that art is also to be understood as a way of relating to the world, and the remarks of Dewey, Fromm, and Heidegger thus point to its ethical relevance (to be clarified in more detail in future work) and underpin its importance.
- 37 In conclusion, in the perspectives of Dewey and Fromm’s ethical theories communication is a means of relating to others, to engage in shared practice and to communicate in a careful manner.

### 3.2. The Concept of Communicative Power(lessness)

- 38 Now, according to the ethical concept of communication just described, good means vividness of activity, bad (actively or systematically) impeding activity. Ethics needs to consider the modification of the conditions that foster or hinder communication. As shown in the previous section, the phenomenon of powerlessness plays a crucial role in explaining people’s regressive behavior. The feeling of powerlessness results from structural hindrances, in persons’ characters as well as institutions, which block good communication (pragmatists might want to add: and thus inquiry) in the sense just described. Accordingly, communicative power(lessness) can be grasped as the quality that collective habits possess on an evaluative scale of the respective relationship of individuals towards others, things, nature, and themselves. It is obvious that the authoritarian character, which according to Fromm was widespread in Germany before the world wars, comes off badly here. This is not at all surprising, because Fromm’s characterology contains the central normative categories, namely the productive and the non-productive orientation; and the authoritarian character falls under the non-productive, i.e. bad, orientation. To illustrate this: The “heroism of the authoritarian

character” is close to Lennon’s “working class hero” mentioned at the very beginning. Fromm writes:

The courage of the authoritarian character is essentially a courage to suffer what fate or its personal representative or “leader” may have destined him for. To suffer without complaining is his highest virtue – not the courage of trying to end suffering or at least to diminish it. Not to change fate, but to submit to it, is the heroism of the authoritarian character. (Fromm 1965: 195)

- 39 If we read this as a theoretical underpinning of Lennon’s song, it accounts for the sarcasm in the refrain. We can imagine the “working class hero” as the kind of individual who willingly submits to and probably even defends common sense, public opinion, and follows the “necessities” of the economic system, not (fully) recognizing the workings of authority.
- 40 To conclude, Dewey shares Fromm’s view that good action, generally speaking, requires active involvement and the highest possible activity of one’s intellectual and emotional capacities. This is always the case when individuals encounter ethical and also practical challenges more broadly, with the right attitude towards others, things, nature or themselves.

## 4. Towards a Deweyan-Frommian Approach to Melioristic Social Science

- 41 In what follows, I focus on the objectives (and results, where they exist) and an outline of the salient research methods that characterize Frommian social psychoanalysis. I will then connect this research to the previous sections to show the relevance of this type of research to a living democracy.
- 42 Recent empirical work in Fromm’s spirit studies primary school teachers in East and West Germany before and after reunification (IEFS 1995). The title of the study, “The Character Wall” (Ger. *Die Charaktermauer*), already hints at the objective: What character-related blockages or productive orientations do teachers who were socialized in different political and economic systems exhibit, and what tasks and challenges does this give rise to for the post-reunification period? As in Fromm’s first published empirical study from 1970 (Fromm & Maccoby 2017), the general hypothesis is that the empirical study of the social character is a crucial basic step to improve people’s quality of life, since it reveals factors blocking and supporting people’s abilities and motivation to readapt to changes in living conditions (say, economical, technological, political) and to live autonomous and happy lives. I will now highlight in an exemplary way some points of Frommian empirical work, showing to what extent they contribute to an ethical-social scientific meliorism that has the concept of communicative power(lessness) as its center. *The Character Wall* employs an elaborate methodology. Regarding research methodology, it seems particularly promising to combine this Frommian qualitative research and its use of sociopschoanalytic methods of interpretation with Dewey’s ethical-political and social philosophy and contemporary studies inspired by it. In the Frommian empirical studies social character is studied by means of fieldwork and interviews. The innovation of the underlying methods is that the interviews are carefully interpreted by means of psychoanalytical methods.<sup>15</sup> These methods allow to resolve the ambiguity of the observable behavior. For example, what appears as caring behavior, indicating a productive character orientation, could also be

an expression of an authoritarian-patronizing character orientation or of the unconcern and shallowness of the marketing character (IEFS 1995: 174). The evaluation takes place in groups of at least five, where attention is paid to the diversity of the group composition. The impressions that the interviewees leave with the evaluators are carefully examined in various steps. The overall impression on the evaluators is taken into account as well as the countertransference experiences (the interviews are recited in the group). Finally, the social background of the interviewee is strongly considered, and an attempt is made to determine the basic orientation of their character. Here we find an elaborate method, to empirically study collective habits that is lacking in Dewey.

43 A key finding of Fromm and Maccoby's (2017) study in Mexico was that the receptive character orientation was one of the most dominant among peasants in the village studied, which the authors believe helps explain why peasants struggle to adapt to new living conditions due to rapid changes in agriculture brought about by new technology on a global scale and dependence on the city (cf. 2017: 237-8).

44 The receptive character orientation belongs to the non-productive orientations and its prevalence indicates a blockage of the ability of ethical adaptation. Maccoby summarizes the personality traits of the large set of peasants (men proportionally even more than women) with receptive traits as follows:

Those villagers brought up before the revolution in the culture of the semi-feudal hacienda lacked the self-confidence and the self-directed, hard-working character of successful peasants throughout the world. Their submissive, receptive, unproductive character that was adapted to life in the hacienda, made them vulnerable to alcoholism and exploitation after the revolution. (Maccoby 2014: "The Scientific Contributions of the Mexican Study")

45 People with a receptive, submissive character orientation expect everything good to come from outside and lack the drive to bring it about themselves. This acquired structure of social character made it difficult for a large part of the villagers to adapt to new situations. Fromm also followed important changes in living conditions in Mexico's recent history. Since the Mexico study is concerned with understanding the relationship between the structure of social character and the productive adaptability of peasants to new circumstances, Fromm and his colleagues were interested in the adaptation of peasants after the changes induced by the Mexican Revolution, in which Mexicans were given land. Their study found that many did not take advantage of their opportunities, and, for example, many fell into alcoholism because of their inherited social character. However, there were other factors as well, such as the very low alcohol prices which encouraged alcoholism. According to Fromm's character theory, people with a pronounced receptive character orientation tend to get into strong dependency relationships. In turn, the resulting fear, guilt, and feelings of unworthiness are then factors that can promote alcoholism.

46 This brief excerpt illustrates that the form of the peasants' social character tenaciously blocks their self-realization. For humanists like Fromm and Dewey, the promotion of people's own agency and initiative is central, also for a living democracy. Empirical study of social character is to be welcomed from a Deweyan perspective. In this outlook, I could only point out some basic features of Frommian empirical research. I have argued that Fromm's theory of social character complements Dewey's ethics. Together they could form a hybrid, interdisciplinarily oriented account in social philosophy. However, much more needs to be said about how to overcome

communicative powerlessness once the social character is identified by means of empirical methods, considering, e.g., Dewey's work on educational reform and Fromm's suggestions to better society that are scattered in his numerous books (e.g., Fromm 2002: ch. 8; 2008: 141-64). Finally, I would like to again note that Fromm (1971: 25-32) clearly recognized his affinity with Dewey; his critique of Dewey can be understood as a constructive one aimed at further expanding scientifically informed, humanistic ethics.

## 5. Conclusion

- 47 The article's aim is to show that Dewey's and Fromm's work are in important respects complementary. This insight is especially worthwhile for embedding Dewey's thoughts in *German Philosophy and Politics* in a wider context and making better sense of how the Germans' falling back into an "undisciplined riot of theoretical and emotional self-assertion" (MW.10: 308), thus a regressive kind of behavior, could occur. In this regard, it was shown in section 2 how Fromm's notion of powerlessness, understood as a feature of the authoritarian type that social character can assume, fits Dewey's (MW.8) argument. The inner-psychic tension to be eased is socially rooted, i.e., shaped through militaristic education, religious doctrines, ideology, and propaganda, as well as the economic conditions of the time. Dewey's and Fromm's views of dualistic separations as reflecting social divisions shows that their World War genealogies are specific studies within a broader conceptual framework they further refined and employed with regard to a diversity of topics. By way of discussing important elements of Fromm's and Dewey's ethical theories in section 3, it could be shown that their ethical theories are tailored to overcome powerlessness by way of investigating and assessing the quality of (collective) habits or (social) character. As an outline, section 4 tried to illustrate that empirical work in Fromm's spirit could be used as a starting point for further elaborating what could be a straightforward approach for a melioristic and interdisciplinary conducted social philosophy.
- 48 Many issues related to the article's topic require further study, have been neglected in the literature, and could only be touched upon here. Literature has grown recently and the ethical theories of Dewey (e.g., Pappas 2008) and Fromm (e.g., the works by Lawrence Wilde and Richard Runge; cf. also the older but comprehensive and critical interpretation of Fromm's works by Funk 1982) received clearer presentation and systematization. What appears to be promising for further research is to make use of the conceptual affinities between Dewey and Fromm for conducting melioristic social science and thus also to put the theory to the test.

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## NOTES

1. Here and in the following, the translations of non-English originals, of which no translations exist, are my own.
2. However, the authorship of La Boétie's *Discourse of Voluntary Servitude* is contested (Schaefer 1998).
3. Cf. Campbell (1995: 133-42). Regarding recent debate within Dewey scholarship, Frega (2015) and Mattarollo (2018) have taken first steps in favor of complementing Dewey's naturalistic ethics – that includes, according to them, a non-essentialist anthropological basis for ethics – with his social philosophy.
4. In this article, by “genealogy” I do not mean the method shaped by Nietzsche and Foucault, but the study of certain factors of German culture in the history of ideas that influenced the emergence of the First World War and with which Dewey and Fromm were concerned. On the relationship of pragmatism and genealogy as a philosophical method, see the numerous publications by Colin Koopman.
5. For discussions of Dewey's *German Philosophy and Politics*, see Braun 2020; Campbell 2004; Honneth 2001; cf. also Hook 1979; Thilly 1915. On Fromm's *Escape from Freedom*, see Funk 1982; Monchinski 2008.
6. For reasons of space, I cannot consider the differences in terminology and the transitions between different books in Fromm's work. On this, see Funk 1982, 1998; IEFS 1995. Submissiveness can be the expression of different character types (e.g., authoritarian, receptive, hording) (cf. Fromm & Maccoby 2017: 106).
7. Regarding the Kingdom of Prussia, cf. MW.8: 156.
8. Although the conditions in question may be that of authoritarian (e.g., feudal, fascist) rule of the few over the many, economic conditions and anonymous forms of authority (e.g., common sense, public opinion, psychic health etc.) play a role as well (cf. Fromm 1965: 125, 190). Importantly, circumstances fostering authoritarian character orientation can also be found in capitalist democratic societies, as IEFS 1995 has shown with regard to primary school teachers in West Germany around the year of Germany's reunification, 1990 (cf. also Fromm 1965: 265-303).
9. On the influence of Luther on Kant, see Stern (2020: section 2).
10. These are less prominent in MW.8, but Dewey has considered these circumstances in other works; see, e.g., Serrano Zamora 2020.
11. I refer here to the features of “productive love,” which is constitutive for the productive orientation in Fromm's theory (e.g., 2002: 31-2).
12. On Dewey's concept of communication, see LW.1: 132-61; on Fromm's concept of communication, see Fuchs 2020.
13. In *A Common Faith*, Dewey distinguished between “adjustment” and “adaptation.” “Adaptation” means the modification of circumstances so that they are accommodated to our wants and purposes. “Adjustments,” in contrast, “pertain to our being in its entirety. [...] It is a change of will conceived as the organic plenitude of our being, rather than any special change in will” (LW.9: 12-3). Dewey prefers the term “adjustment” insofar as “adaptation” typically excludes this latter meaning. When we speak here of “ethical adaptation,” this is not to exclude, for example, that religious, aesthetic, and moral experience are mutually exclusive, nor that in acting well, the self as a whole is at play when one must ask oneself what kind of self one would most like to become (cf. LW.7: 287).
14. Cf. Fromm (1971: 67-82) on the marketing character; Hartmann & Honneth 2006; IEFS (1995: 185); Sennett 1998.
15. In the following, I refer to IEFS (1995: 164-74). See the detailed account there.

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## ABSTRACTS

This article aims to combine the strengths of Erich Fromm's and John Dewey's social philosophies. I argue that the merits of this comparison become particularly clear when the theories are outlined and compared in the following three steps. First, a social theoretical common ground of Dewey and Fromm will be illustrated. Their "World War genealogies" share the same defense mechanism as the major explanation of the Germans' tendency to voluntary submission, which involves a strong feeling of powerlessness. Against this background, the next step elaborates the ethical side of their argument. Already the World War genealogies are written with melioristic intent, and especially later works (in case of both authors) elaborate the respective ethical theory as well as the ideas concerning melioristic social science and social psychology. These ethics aim at good communication (in a broad sense), while the melioristic social research focuses on the concrete manifestations of social character, allowing to empirically identify hindering and facilitating factors of social amelioration. Both can be linked using the concept of communicative power(lessness). By way of outlook, I will finally consider the combination of a democratic, communication-oriented ethics with qualitative sociopschoanalytic research in Fromm's sense as a straightforward and promising approach for an interdisciplinary social philosophy.

## AUTHOR

**CEDRIC BRAUN**

cedricbrau[at]gmail.com

University of St. Gallen