

Unorthodox: Thoughts on Tradition from Non-Traditional Thinkers

Rabbi Barry Kleinberg



Outline of this course

- 15th May – Isaiah Berlin
- 22nd May – George Steiner
- **29th May – Erich Fromm**
- 5th June – Martin Buber
- 12th June – Cynthia Ozick



Erich Fromm– Bio I

Erich Seligmann Fromm - March 23, 1900 – March 18, 1980) the only child of Orthodox Jewish parents. He studied Talmud and Chasidism in depth. He had a deep knowledge of Jewish mysticism.

He started his academic studies in 1918 at the University of Frankfurt am Main with two semesters of jurisprudence. During the summer semester of 1919, Fromm studied at the University of Heidelberg, where he began studying sociology under Alfred Weber (brother of the better known sociologist Max Weber), psychiatrist-philosopher Karl Jaspers, and Heinrich Rickert. Fromm received his PhD in sociology from Heidelberg in 1922. During the mid-1920s, he trained to become a psychoanalyst through Frieda Reichmann's psychoanalytic sanatorium in Heidelberg. They married in 1926, but separated shortly after and divorced in 1942. He began his own clinical practice in 1927. In 1930 he joined the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research and completed his psychoanalytical training.

After the Nazi takeover of power in Germany, Fromm moved first to [Geneva](#) and then, in 1934, to [Columbia University](#) in New York.

Erich Fromm– Bio II

After leaving Columbia, Fromm helped form the New York branch of the Washington School of Psychiatry in 1943, and in 1946 co-founded the William Alanson White Institute of Psychiatry, Psychoanalysis, and Psychology. He was on the faculty of Bennington College from 1941 to 1949, and taught courses at the New School for Social Research in New York from 1941 to 1959.

When Fromm moved to Mexico City in 1949, he became a professor at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) and established a psychoanalytic section at the medical school there. Meanwhile, he taught as a professor of psychology at Michigan State University from 1957 to 1961 and as an adjunct professor of psychology at the graduate division of Arts and Sciences at New York University after 1962. He taught at UNAM until his retirement, in 1965, and at the Mexican Society of Psychoanalysis (SMP) until 1974. In 1974 he moved from Mexico City to Muralto, Switzerland, and died at his home in 1980, five days before his eightieth birthday. All the while, Fromm maintained his own clinical practice and published a series of books.

Early psychoanalytic career

In the 1920s, Fromm began studying psychoanalytical theory with Frieda Reichmann, eventually undergoing therapy with her. Together, the two of them opened up the Therapeuticum, an experimental, residential, psychoanalytic institution that combined therapy with Orthodox Jewish observance.

Though Reichmann was 11 years Fromm's senior, the two married, in 1926 - the same year they gave up their religious observance. The Therapeuticum closed two years later.

Atheism I

https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1980/03/19/psychoanalyst-and-philosopher-erich-fromm-dies/dae653e2-ef68-482a-8505-46f88b06ea81/?utm_term=.c8c0070ca363

The outbreak of World War I in 1914 was one of the profound experiences of Dr. Fromm's life. "For me, the First World War was the beginning of the process of brutalization that continues to this day," he told an interviewer in 1962.

When he was 26, Dr. Fromm, although descended from a long line of rabbis and the product of a devout Jewish upbringing, abandoned Judaism.

Interview in 1962

"I gave up my religious convictions and practices because I just didn't want to participate in any division of the human race, whether religious or political," he said, in the same interview.

Atheism II

Although Fromm was reportedly an atheist; he described his own position as "nontheistic mysticism".

You shall be as Gods: a Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and its Tradition (1954)

In this book, Fromm argues for the benefit of Orthodox Judaism – but without God. He was a completely non-religious, atheist Jew writing about how psychologically important Jewish Law and its behavioural rituals (including keeping Shabbat and Kashrut) were for the sanity of modern society.

Religion for Atheists – de Botton

Even those who do not believe in God can benefit from the practical wisdom, community structures, and cultural rituals that religions offer. De Botton does not attempt to revive faith but instead seeks to extract what is useful and nourishing from religious traditions and apply them to secular life.

He explores how religions address universal human needs—such as the desire for connection, meaning, ethical guidance, and a sense of awe—through rituals, art, architecture, moral education, and communal gatherings. De Botton suggests secular society could learn from religion's ability to foster community, repetition, compassion, and emotional health.

He proposes a kind of "secular religion"—drawing from the aesthetic, ethical, and psychological insights of traditions like Christianity, Judaism, and Buddhism—without requiring belief in the supernatural. The book blends philosophy, sociology, and personal reflection to offer a vision of spiritual richness without dogma.

Fromm and the Bible

You shall be as Gods

FOR THE GREAT humanist thinker Erich Fromm, the Hebrew Bible was a revolutionary book. “Its theme,” he wrote (in *You Shall Be As Gods*, 1966), “is the liberation of [humanity] from the incestuous ties to blood and soil, from the submission to idols, from slavery, from powerful masters, to freedom for the individual, for the nation, and for all [hu]mankind.”

Zionism I

Early Zionist Engagement:

Fromm was initially involved in Zionist organizations, influenced by religious Zionist figures like Rabbi Nehemia Anton Nobel.

Shift to Criticism:

He soon distanced himself from Zionism, finding it at odds with his ideals of universalism and humanism.

Ethical and Philosophical Grounds:

Fromm's opposition stemmed from a belief that Zionism's nationalist approach diverged from the universal values of authentic Judaism.

Zionism II

Criticism of Israeli Policies:

He was critical of Israel's policies toward Arabs, viewing them as oppressive and unjust.

Focus on Universalism and Justice:

Fromm's humanism was broad and ecumenical, prioritizing justice and non-violence on a global scale.

Influence of World Wars:

His aversion to the horrors of World Wars I and II further fuelled his scepticism towards nationalism and its potential for conflict.

To have or to be (1976) - Summary

To Have or To Be? explores two fundamental modes of existence: the “having” mode and the “being” mode. He argues that modern capitalist society is dominated by the "having" mode, where identity and happiness are tied to possessions, status, and consumption. In this mode, people define themselves by what they own, leading to alienation, anxiety, and a loss of authentic selfhood.

In contrast, the "being" mode is rooted in authentic experience, love, creativity, and presence. It emphasizes living meaningfully, engaging with others and the world without trying to control or possess. Fromm draws on psychology, philosophy, and spiritual traditions (especially Buddhism and Christianity) to advocate a shift toward the "being" mode as essential for personal fulfilment and social harmony.

He calls for a radical transformation of society and values, suggesting that only by embracing the "being" mode can humanity overcome materialism and build a more just, compassionate world.

To have or to be (1976)

The alternative of *having* versus *being* does not appeal to common sense. *To have*, so it would seem, is a normal function of our life; in order to live we must have things. Moreover, we must have things in order to enjoy them. In a culture in which the supreme goal is to have - and to have more and more - and in which one can speak of someone as “being worth a million dollars,” how can there be an alternative between having and being? On the contrary, it would seem that the very essence of being is having; that if one *has* nothing, one *is* nothing.

To have or to be (1976)

Yet the great Masters of Living have made the alternative between having and being a central issue of their respective systems. The Buddha teaches that in order to arrive at the highest stage of human development; we must not crave possessions. Jesus teaches; “For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall have it. For what is a man advantaged, if he gain the whole world, and lose himself, or be cast away?” (Luke 9:24-25). Master Eckhart taught that to have nothing and make oneself open and “empty,” not to let one’s ego stand in one’s way, is the condition for achieving spiritual wealth and strength. Marx taught that luxury is as much a vice as poverty and that our goal should be to *be* much, not to *have* much. (I refer here to the real Marx, the radical humanist, not to the vulgar forgery presented by Soviet communism.)

Next week – Martin Buber

"When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity that surges between them."