



7. Forms of Fromm's Thought

Having identified some sources of Fromm's sociopsychological discoveries and philosophical-anthropological views and of his understanding of humanistic religion and ethics, we will now attempt to define more closely certain forms and conceptual constructs that underlie and persist throughout his work. First, we seek to establish a link between Fromm's insights and views and a conceptual model and certain forms of thought, and to discover their roots in intellectual history. The difference in the forms of thought that were noted, especially in the comments on humanistic religion, will then be thematized and shown to result from a competition between interpretive models. Finally, by identifying the forms of thought, we attempt to make it easier to differentiate between Fromm's empirical and scientific thought, and his philosophical and anthropological reflections.

The Ecstatic-Cathartic Conceptual Model and Its Forms of Thought or Contentless Formulae (*Leerformeln*)

Fromm's contrapositioning of authoritarian and revolutionary character and authoritarian and humanistic religion, and his particular understanding of a *theologia negativa*, only become comprehensible against the background of a form of thought that is dialectical in nature. Ernst Topitsch ascribed such a form of thought, for which dialectics is always a process of negation and contradiction, {220} to an intellectual model or construct that uses this form of dialectic as its most important form of thought. Because of its origin in divination and gnosis, but also because of its character and function, he calls this construct „ecstatic-cathartic.“ Before the ecstatic-cathartic model can be discussed in its distinctive character and development, the concern that caused Ernst Topitsch to call such forms of

thought „contentless“ will be critically evaluated.

The Concept and Function of Contentless Formulae According to Ernst Topitsch, and Their Critique¹

If a positivistic concept of science is adopted as the point of view from which to understand man and world, an explanation is needed for the fact „that through the centuries, certain linguistic formulae have been recognized as relevant insights or even as fundamental principles of being, cognition and valuation, and that they continue to be so recognized to this day, and this not in spite of the fact but precisely because, and insofar as, they have no factual or normative content or none that can be more closely specified.“² On the presupposition that scientific statements about man and his world³ must be falsifiable, all statements that cannot be falsified by simple empirical data because they elude a direct test become pseudo-statements: they are contentless assertions.

The origin of such contentless formulations lies in archaic, mythic, and religious ideas in which „a differentiation among the various forms of human orientation in the world does not yet exist and what is articulated later as religion, philosophy, sci-

¹ See the following studies by E. Topitsch: *Vom Ursprung und Ende der Metaphysik*, esp. pp. 280-313; *Seelenglaube and Selbstinterpretation*, esp. pp. 193-199; *Marxismus and Gnosis*, esp. pp. 258-268; *Über Leerformeln; Atheismus and Naturrecht*. Cf. the dissertation by Michael Schmid, *Leerformeln und Ideologiekritik*, which does not advance our knowledge of the matter, especially since the author distanced himself from a number of his statements when the study was published.

² E. Topitsch, *Über Leerformeln*, pp. 233f.

³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 237; and *Vom Ursprung und Ende der Metaphysik*, pp. 282f.



ence, art, morality, law and politics is still found in undifferentiated unity.⁴ On this primitive level, man attempts to make the world and his own self (the soul) comprehensible by „viewing the more remote and unknown in analogy to what is closer at hand and known, and this principally by taking certain fundamental situations of the social production and reproduction of life as models.“⁵ The world is thus seen in analogy to a social structure such as the family, the clan, or the state, so that reflection about and interpretations of the world, man, and soul correspond to a sociomorphous conceptual model. At a higher stage of cultural development, the world and the self are interpreted by analogy to the products of human skill: under these conditions, thinking occurs in accordance with a technomorphous model or construct.⁶ In addition to technique and {221} social structure, nature and particularly the processlike character of life provide the basis for yet another model, the biomorphous. Finally, there are the doctrines concerning the soul and those interpretations of the world that are inspired by ecstatic-cathartic motifs and have their origin „in the belief that there is a soul that can be separated from the body, a state in which it becomes capable of superhuman achievements.“⁷

At the time they prevailed, conceptual models had a variety of functions and enabled man to orient himself comprehensively in regard to himself and his environment. More specifically, models can have the following functions: „Information about important events, especially about the consequences of certain forms of conduct, and control over the environment and one’s own body were expected of them. They also seemed to instill confidence in a course of action for they sanctioned norms and decisions, made unavoidable suffering easier to bear, and offered compensations for real

renunciations.“⁸

Topitsch’s interest in these constructs and forms of thought is the result of an ideology-critical concern: the „critique of mythical and metaphysical interpretations of world and self by their historical, sociological and psychological analysis.“⁹ In this undertaking, Topitsch traces a variety of conceptual constructs through the history of philosophy and theology, and formulates a number of conclusions:

The history of philosophy shows a process of rationalization leading from myth to philosophy.¹⁰ Philosophy must limit itself to that sphere of the factual that can be described in „contexts of falsifiable statements,“¹¹ and every statement that is part of a conceptual construct or a form of thought should be based on falsifiable experiential knowledge. If traditional constructs and patterns do not satisfy this requirement, they do not constitute knowledge but are contentless formulae--empty in the sense that they do not tell us anything about man’s experiential knowledge.¹² If, nonetheless, such formulations are used to interpret reality, they are inadmissibly given a content and what results is an ideological understanding of man and world.¹³

Whether traditional forms of thought and constructs are contentless formulae that have the character of pseudo-statements and ideologies hinges on a certain understanding of science. {222} Topitsch’s concept of science is close to that of the Neopositivists of the Vienna circle,¹⁴ and a general critique of positivism¹⁵ applies to his ideology-critical under-

⁴ E. Topitsch, *Atheismus und Naturrecht*, p. 126.

⁵ E. Topitsch, *Über Leerformeln*, p. 234.

⁶ On the sociomorphous and technomorphous conceptual model, cf. especially E. Topitsch, *Vom Ursprung und Ende der Metaphysik*.

⁷ Topitsch, *Über Leerformeln*, p. 235.

⁸ Ibid. Cf. *Seelenglaube und Selbstinterpretation*, p. 193: „Accordingly, mythical cosmology already has principally three functions: an empirical-pragmatic one, an ethical-political one, and an aesthetic-contemplative one.“

⁹ *Über Leerformeln*, p. 233.

¹⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 236.

¹¹ E. Topitsch, *Marxismus und Gnosis*, p. 266.

¹² Cf. *Über Leerformeln*, pp. 237f.

¹³ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 263f.

¹⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 233.

¹⁵ Cf. T. Adorno, „Der Positivismusstreit in der deutschen Soziologie,“ for a critique of hleopositivism from a philosophical, theological-ethical perspective; cf. W.



standing of contentless formulae. It is not a matter of disputing that the traditional models of the understanding of self and the world can be ideologies and contentless, but of criticizing an approach that asserts that a Neopositivistic concept of science generates the only valid criterion for a critique of ideology. This would be true only if a definitive interpretation of man and history could be advanced, and if man and all his possibilities could be scientifically „understood.“ The analysis of forms of thought and constructs as practiced in the sociology of knowledge can explain the mechanism by which significant insights are passed on over centuries. It can also show why significant insights without definable substantive and normative content can be passed on, and what function such contentless formulations have. But such a sociology bars a comprehensive understanding of the significance of forms of thought and conceptual models if it excludes *a priori* the possibility of some further-reaching significance simply on the basis of a Neopositivist decision about what science is. To limit oneself to a concept of science that extends no further than to the description of sets of falsifiable statements in the realm of the factual¹⁶ reduces the reality of man¹⁷ to areas of falsifiable experiential knowledge. How little justice such a reductionist concept of science and reality does to man and his history is obvious when it is compared with Fromm's attempt to understand man as a being with imperative psychic needs. For this reason, Fromm's more comprehensive concept of science¹⁸ is given preference here over Topitsch's Neopositiv-

ist one.

The following comments are based on the historical and sociological insights and research of Ernst Topitsch and should be read with this reservation about his positivistic approach in mind. The decision to speak of a contentless formulation rather than of a form of thought is governed by the relation of a form of thought and an ideational construct to the comprehensively understood reality of man.

In opposition to Topitsch, it is argued here that reality comprehends more than the circumscribed and circumscribable sphere of the factual, that it transcends what can be described in contexts of falsifiable statements. {223}

The History of the Ecstatic-Cathartic Conceptual Model and of Its Forms of Thought

Of the significant models that were developed during the course of intellectual history--the models by which man interpreted his world, himself, and his history--the one Topitsch calls „ecstatic-cathartic“ is especially revelatory of Fromm's thought, particularly of his dialectic.

The origins of the ecstatic-cathartic model or construct must be looked for in the gnostic myths, which, in turn, were molded by shamanistic magic and divination. These myths were formed on the basis of experiences „of superiority over the pressure of the environing world that occur in states of trance or under the influence of drugs, and either set in spontaneously or--in the majority of cases--are induced artificially by chanting and rhythmic dances, vigils, fasting, breathing exercises and other ascetic practices.“¹⁹ Such experiences form the background for the beginnings of an ideational construct central to which is the possibility of an ecstatic superiority over the limitations imposed by space and

Korff, *Norm und Sittlichkeit*, pp. 25f, 34.

¹⁶ Cf. Topitsch, *Marxismus and Gnosis*, p. 266.

¹⁷ On the concept „reality,“ as used by Topitsch, cf., e.g., the use of „immediate reality“ (*unmittelbare Wirklichkeit*) and „original reality“ (*ursprüngliche Wirklichkeit*) in *Seelenglaube und Selbstinterpretation*, pp. 198f. In contrast to a concept of reality that is reductionist and limited to facticity or cognizable reality, see the understanding of reality as „being that presses toward unfolding and perfection,“ in A. Auer, *Autonome Moral und christlicher Glaube*, p. 35.

¹⁸ Cf. pp. 55-66 and 133-136.

¹⁹ Topitsch, *Seelenglaube und Selbstinterpretation*, p. 172. On the historical development of shamanism and its influence on Indian and Western thought, see *ibid.*, pp. 172-175, 181-187.



time and one's own corporality. While in Greek philosophy from Parmenides to Aristotle, and especially in Plato, mystical ideas were increasingly transformed into the conviction that the soul²⁰ that was freed of its body enjoyed a contemplative superiority over the world,²¹ and true philosophy was viewed as an important means of the catharsis of the soul, renewed contact with magic and ecstatic salvation doctrines of Oriental provenance subsequently led to the rise of gnostic and Neoplatonic speculation.²² „The basic gnostic motif is the pressure of reality that is experienced with cutting incisiveness and its result, the need for salvation that seeks satisfaction in a corresponding interpretation of the human self and of the entire world process.“²³ The gnostic interpretation of the human self sees in men souls of light that have fallen away from a divinity conceived as unknowable. Since they lost the knowledge of their divine origin in their fall, they can either become completely estranged from that origin or recover knowledge of it (gnosis) by becoming aware of their divine character.²⁴ This gnostic „knowledge“ is a „process of redemption that transforms man by reawakening his consciousness of divinity.“²⁵ Man's salvation is gnosis, a becoming aware of „the divinity of his own 'true' self.“²⁶

This idea of the estrangement of the human soul from its divine {224} origin and its salvation through gnosis subsequently became the model for an interpretation of the entire world process. The world emanates from God, and God and world thus become distinct. From this estranged state, the world returns to unity with the world ground or

God. This model of *próodos* (emanation) and *epístrophē* (return) gives rise to the „alexandrine world schema and its fundamental idea of God's descent into matter which also means the creation of the world and a return of man to God by which he is redeemed.“²⁷ The assessment of any given present as a time of necessary estrangement and calamity explains the attraction this ecstatic-cathartic construct of Gnosticism and Neoplatonism had for Judaeo-Christian apocalypticism. Both the apocalyptic and the gnostic traditions see „the present, pressing evil as a necessary negative stage on the way toward ultimate salvation.“²⁸ During the course of the intellectual history of the West, especially after this three-phase model of salvation was received by Dionysus the Aeropagite, both traditions repeatedly fused and had particular influence on the history of Jewish and Christian mysticism.

Topitsch traces the ecstatic-cathartic construct through history all the way down to the concept of dialectics in Hegel and Marx. He proves the presence of this form of thought in Isaac Luria's Kabbala²⁹ and demonstrates that a tradition runs from there to Friedrich Christoph Oetinger,³⁰ the Tübinger Stift, and on to Hegel and Schelling. Swabian pietism, an intense Christian eschatological consciousness that attained its fullest development in Johannes Albrecht Bengel, Oetinger's teacher, can also be noted.³¹

²⁰ Topitsch, *Marxismus und Gnosis*, p. 240.

²¹ Ibid., p. 240, where he speaks of a „philosophical process of rationalization.“

²² Ibid., p. 242, and *Seelenglaube und Selbstinterpretation*, p. 187.

²³ *Seelenglaube und Selbstinterpretation*, pp. 187f.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 288, and *Marxismus und Gnosis*, pp. 242f.

²⁵ *Marxismus und Gnosis*, p. 243. Following H.-Ch. Puech, Topitsch therefore calls this gnostic doctrine „transforming mysticism“ (p. 243, n. 24).

²⁶ *Seelenglaube und Selbstinterpretation*, p. 187.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 288.

²⁸ *Marxismus und Gnosis*, p. 245. Here Topitsch reports reflections that are to be found in Jakob Taubes, *Abendländische Eschatologie*, pp. 31-40. They are based on ideas in Hans Leisegang, *Denkformen*, and represent Taubes' effort to delimit Leisegang's theory of a circular dialectic. Taubes also refers to Hans Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*.

²⁹ Cf. *Marxismus und Gnosis*, pp. 248-252.

³⁰ Cf. E. Benz, *Die christliche Kabbala*. Ernst Benz shows in some detail that there were links between Christoph Oetinger and the Zohar, the Kabbala readers Johann Jakob Schutz and Knorr von Rosenroth, and the Kabbalists Isaac Luria and Koppel Hecht.

³¹ For Johann Albrecht Bengel, „the story ends ... as a dialectical drama, with the abrupt transformation of the



Topitsch draws on the concept of alienation in Hegel's philosophy of history and his theory of work³² for a convincing illustration of these summarily sketched developments, for we see here an application of the pattern of a „three-phase rhythm of original state, *próodos* and *epístrophē* negation and negation of the negation, etc.“³³ In his concept of the dialectic, Hegel reflects this form of thought.

The Concept of Dialectics as Form of Thought and Contentless Formula as Rooted in the Ecstatic-Cathartic Model

The concept of dialectics is as old and polymorphous as Occidental philosophy.³⁴ Hegel's understanding of it takes a specific form {225} that adopts the substance of the ecstatic-cathartic tradition.³⁵ „Dialectics manifests itself in the dialectical and process-like development of his philosophy.“³⁶ This philosophy carries out the process of „life“³⁷ in which „the elements of separation and opposition or negation are as effective and indispensable as those of reunification and reconciliation or negation of the negation.“³⁸ The dialectics of being takes place within the dialectics of knowledge because „the world process in its totality is conceived as the

realm of evil into the Kingdom of God“ (Topitsch, *Marxismus und Gnosis*, p. 253). This abrupt transformation is indicated by an increase of evil and is predicted for the year 1836 by Johann Albrecht Bengel.

³² Cf. *Marxismus und Gnosis*, pp. 256-258, and Topitsch, *Die Sozialphilosophie Hegels als Heilslehre und Herrschaftsideologie; Über Leerformeln*, pp. 247-251.

³³ *Marxismus und Gnosis*, p. 258.

³⁴ Cf. the contributions of various authors to the article „Dialektik“ in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. by J. Ritter, Vol. II, cols. 164-226.

³⁵ 35. *Marxismus und Gnosis*, p. 247, where Topitsch sees an early form of Hegel's concept of dialectics in the understanding of dialectics of the PseudoDionysius translator Scotus Erigena.

³⁶ H. H. Kohlenberger, „Dialektik,“ col. 189.

³⁷ Cf. G. F. Hegel, *Sämtliche Werke* (Glockner), Vol. I, p. 49.

³⁸ *Über Leerformeln*, p. 247.

dialectical self-realization and the coming to consciousness of spirit which means that ... the laws of reality ... are necessarily also those of thought.“³⁹ Such an „idealism“ is grounded in an Absolute that, as identity and nonidentity, finds its true unity only in the sublation of its own nonidentity. „Hegel's dialectic presupposes the concept of the Absolute; it cannot do without it.“⁴⁰

Dialectical thought becomes problematical when it is made a general principle of knowledge and order, and this is true whether or not an absolute is premised. When Karl R. Popper notes, for example, that for Hegel „dialectics is a theory that maintains that something--particularly human thought--develops in a way that is characterized by the so-called dialectical triad of thesis, antithesis and synthesis,“⁴¹ he is really no longer talking about Hegel's understanding of dialectics. In such formulations, there is indeed the danger that dialectics will be seen as contentless. In his critique of Hegel, Topitsch emphasizes two circumstances that make the concept of dialectics contentless. First, in Hegel, the dialectical triad is transposed „from the realm of unverifiable theosophical speculation to that of verifiable facts“⁴² so that a conflict between dialectics and formal logic and the methods of the sciences develops.⁴³ And second, by the application of dialectics to all areas of reality, the concept of dialectics becomes nebulous⁴⁴ and that of negation totally empty. Dialectics is given general validity, and the concept of negation comes to comprehend all kinds of nonidentity such as logical contradiction, scien-

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 248; cf. Kohlenberger, „Dialektik,“ col. 190 and the bibliography in cols. 192f.

⁴⁰ Kohlenberger, „Dialektik,“ col. 190.

⁴¹ K. R. Popper, „Was ist Dialektik?“ p. 263.

⁴² *Marxismus und Gnosis*, p. 258. The question of the extent to which this criticism can be maintained if the argument does not proceed from an anti-Idealist point of view but respects Hegel's concept of the Absolute cannot be pursued here.

⁴³ Cf. *Marxismus und Gnosis*, p. 258, and *Über Leerformeln*, pp. 248-250. More extensively in Popper, „Was ist Dialektik?“, pp. 267-272, 278-283.

⁴⁴ Cf. Popper, „Was ist Dialektik?“, p. 273f.



tific refutation, evaluative rejection, social conflict, the sequence of developmental stages, and finally, mere difference. When all of these areas are subsumed under this concept and integrated in the dialectical rhythm as negation or negation of the negation, dialectics as a form of thought becomes an arbitrarily manipulable contentless formula.⁴⁵ Whether this critique of dialectics is also a justifiable {226} critique of Hegel cannot be decided here. But it is true that by extending the application of the dialectical triad, Topitsch has made us aware that there is a line that separates scientific from nonscientific thought and that also defines the boundary between form of thought and contentless formula.⁴⁶ Dialectics as a concept becomes contentless in the sciences when a dialectical triad is asserted even though it has no relation to what is empirically given or can actually be falsified by experiential fact.⁴⁷ This means „that dialectics cannot really be used to make empirical predictions.”⁴⁸ But Topitsch's claim⁴⁹ that we are already dealing with contentless formulae and nonscientific thought whenever falsification is impossible is the outgrowth of a Neopositivistic concept of science to which we do not assent.⁵⁰

In the work of Marx, dialectics as a form of thought took on a distinctive cast. It is being considered here because Marx's thought had a particu-

lar influence on Fromm's. Marx transferred the ecstatic-cathartic model of Gnosticism into this world: „Just as in gnosticism, the world emanates from God or he estranges himself from it and attains his perfection through a painful self-estrangement, so working man estranges himself from the product of his labor and is to find salvation from his self-estrangement in a higher being, i.e. true humanity in socialist society.”⁵¹

How dialectics and empirical data relate to each other is a question that arises anew when the idealistic basis of the concept of dialectics is abandoned in an „inversion.“ For „the best argument in favor of dialectics lies in its applicability to the development of thought, especially of philosophical thought,”⁵² so that for Hegel, for example, history is the history of ideas. Marx opposed Idealism but retained Hegel's doctrine that „the dialectical `contradictions,' `negations' and `negations of negations' represent dynamic forces of historical development.”⁵³ But Marx's materialistic reformulation does not mean that dialectics is identical with the essence and the law of natural and historical movement, that it is a procedure of empirical research, a method for systematic and deductive presentation, or a method for presenting social history or the history of ideology.⁵⁴ Marx uses dialectics merely as a „procedure to reconstruct the categorical system of a class-related social science, as a method in the critique of political economy, and as a form of ideology critique.”⁵⁵ {227

Although a number of misunderstandings of statements by Marx-especially of his early writings,

⁴⁵ Cf. *Über Leerformeln*, p. 251, and *Marxismus und Gnosis*, pp. 258f. Topitsch sees an important reason for the illegitimate expansion of dialectics in the fact that „the origin of the dialectical forms of thought in gnostic myths of salvation has perhaps been even more thoroughly forgotten than the origin of natural law doctrines in the socio-cosmic myth of archaic high cultures.“

⁴⁶ This is true even when there is no agreement with Topitsch's reductionist concept of science, and therefore not just falsifiable scientific facts are the object of science.

⁴⁷ This aspect of Topitsch's critique of dialectics is decisive for the criticism of Fromm. See pp. 239-243.

⁴⁸ *Über Leerformeln*, p. 254.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 251f.

⁵⁰ Cf. the critique on p. 221f.

⁵¹ *Seelenglaube und Selbstinterpretation*, pp. 188f; *Über Leerformeln*, p. 254; and J: Y. Calvez, *Karl Marx: Darstellung und Kritik seines Denkens*, p. 298.

⁵² K. Popper, „Was ist Dialektik?“, p. 283.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

⁵⁴ Cf. J. Frese, „Dialektik,“ cols. 198f. This delimitation does not imply that dialectics was not in fact understood in this way, or that it does not continue to be so understood, with Karl Marx being quoted in support.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, col. 200.



which propose a *Realdialektik*⁵⁶ (dialectic of the real)-are thus excluded, it is precisely when dialectics is understood as a form of ideology critique that the danger that it will degenerate into a contentless formula arises.

Marx judges what exists and is given at any particular time, not by philosophical reflection, but by a critique of such reflection as an ideology, though he cannot advance grounds for this decision that lie beyond the criticism itself. As a consequence, dialectics as a form of thought falls under the suspicion of being a substitute for a comprehensive theory. Negation can become arbitrary and dialectics itself a contentless formula--that is, ideological--and this is the decisive weakness of the concept of dialectics in a Marxism that neither can nor wants to dispense with a comprehensive theory. This reproach also applies to Fromm's reception of Marx and his understanding of dialectics.

As a process of *positio*, *negatio*, and *negatio negationis* in the three-fold sense of sublation as *tolerare*, *elevare*, and *conservare* (the way Hegel and Marx used it), dialectics is a form of thought derived from the ecstatic-cathartic construct that is rooted in a gnostic-apocalyptic tradition. A number of concepts and elements in Marx's theory make it possible to clarify this assertion.⁵⁷ The extent to which his self-proclaimed this-worldly and scientific view of man actually follows the ideas and forms of thought of gnostic and apocalyptic doctrines of salvation „becomes perfectly apparent in the Marxist interpretation of the historical and social process and especially of economic development as a drama of man's self-realization by way of his self-estrangement.“⁵⁸ If it is true that man creates himself through work, „the product of his labor ... begins to confront him as an autonomous power.“⁵⁹

Not only the parallel to cosmological ideas in gnostic or kabbalistic traditions emerges here, but the gnostic and apocalyptic notion of an apocalyptic increase and intensification of negative forces has its counterpart in the role Marx assigns to the proletariat when revolution ushers in socialism.⁶⁰

More generally, one may say that the power of the negative can be seen as the key to an understanding of theories about apocalypse, Gnosticism, the Kabbala, mysticism, pietism, and other forms of ecstatic-cathartic ideas all the way down to Hegel's and {228} Marx's systems. This is why a particular view of history becomes necessary: „If the present time of the world in which the self lives is not its home, some event must have caused this questionable condition. That God and world are estranged from each other becomes meaningful only on the presupposition that history is identical with the eon of sin that lies embedded between creation and salvation. ... Gnostically, salvation means abolition of the distance from the origin. And distance is estrangement.“⁶¹ This approach gives force to Marx's demand that a theory of history not content itself with statements about the here and now but develop overarching ideas.⁶² It also shows that the topos of a negative view of the present is necessary, and that what is negative in the present must be emphasized for the sake of a future good. In addition, we see here the grounding of the claim to have a concept of criticism whose premise is that the critique of what exists is always necessary and legitimate.⁶³

In Marx's case, more than gnostic knowledge--that is, gnosis as contemplation-is employed to overcome the negative. This is precisely the basis for his critique of Hegel and of Hegel's assessment

⁵⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, cols. 198f.

⁵⁷ Cf. especially J. Taubes, *Abendländische Eschatologie*, esp. pp. 184-188; A. Rich, „Die kryptoreligiösen Motive in den Frühschriften von Karl Marx“; E. Topitsch, *Marxismus und Gnosis*, pp. 259-265.

⁵⁸ *Marxismus und Gnosis*, pp. 261f.

⁵⁹ Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, p. 324; also, see p. 73f.

⁶⁰ Cf. *Marxismus und Gnosis*, pp. 262f.

⁶¹ J. Taubes, *Abendländische Eschatologie*, pp. 36, 37.

⁶² In view of the fact that Marx's thought has its origin in the ecstatic-cathartic conceptual construct, one should choose an interpretation whose point of departure is the Marx of the early writings.

⁶³ On the nexus between theory of history and (dialectical) critique, cf. R. Schaeffler, *Religion und kritisches Bewusstsein*, esp. pp. 71-81.



of philosophy. Yet Marx does not abandon the tradition of the ecstatic-cathartic construct; he merely chooses its markedly apocalyptic and practical form in which transfiguration involves the practical and active transformation of man.⁶⁴ The „power of evil and of suffering, in short of the ‘negative,’ is the real motif of both Hegel’s and Marx’s thought. They seek a solution that will make this power appear as both necessary and as destined to be abolished by man.“⁶⁵

Dialectics in Fromm’s Work

Defining the ecstatic-cathartic conceptual model in the dialectics of Hegel and Marx allows us to see that with his philosophical-anthropological, religio-critical, and ethical views, Fromm stands in the tradition of this model. Although he explicitly traces the most important concepts to Marx, he makes, apart from some reflections on „paradoxical logic,“⁶⁶ no comments on dialectics, let alone any sociological reflection about dialectics as the form of thought of a particular conceptual model. Nonetheless, it is {229} obvious that his roots are in this tradition. It can also be shown that Marx was not the primary mediator of this model.

Fromm’s Thought in the Tradition of the Ecstatic-Cathartic Model

Fromm grew up in a Jewish spiritual and social milieu and was influenced by the cathartic element of this religion, which orthodoxy especially emphasizes. As a young man, he was much influenced by his Talmud teacher, Schneur Salman Rabinkov, who was both a Habadnik and a socialist and responsible for Fromm’s interest in socialist thought. One may plausibly assume that it was primarily Rabin-

koy and the mysticism of Habad Hasidism, and only secondarily Marx’s religio-critical modification of the conceptual model, that shaped Fromm’s thought.

Hasidism is primarily a development of the Lurianic Kabbala and its apocalyptic version in Sabbatianism⁶⁷ and shares the concerns of Jewish mysticism with these.⁶⁸ Gershom Scholem sees the origin of Jewish mysticism in the fact that „Gnosticism, one of the last great manifestations of mythology in religious thought ... lent figures of speech to the Jewish mystic,“⁶⁹ and he demonstrates this in his discussion of Merkabah mysticism, the precursor of the Kabbala.⁷⁰ It is not surprising that Jewish mysticism should be a stimulus for an ecstatic-cathartic construct: „To most Kabbalists, as true seal-bearers of the world of myth, the existence of evil is, at any rate, one of the most pressing problems, and one which keeps them continuously occupied with attempts to solve it.“⁷¹

It is principally with the Zohar and on the basis of the Sehrot doctrine that Jewish mysticism was elaborated in Spanish Kabbalism. The Sefirot doctrine represents a theosophical speculation that synthesizes various gnostic, Neoplatonic, and apocalyptic traditions in a typical ecstatic-cathartic construct, the kabbalistic one.⁷² In the „breaking of the vessels,“ the gnostic doctrine concerning the sparks became the kabbalistic cosmogony that included all those details that are characteristic of an ecstatic-cathartic construct.⁷³ While the tradition of the ecstatic-cathartic model that runs from the Lurianic Kabbala to the Christian Kabbala and Swabian pietism and on to Hegel and Marx is relatively hazv, the link to Hasidism and the Habad Hasidism of Shneur Zalman is clear and direct: the most important source for the {230} Habad doctrine is the Zo-

⁶⁷ See p. 197f.

⁶⁸ See pp. 195-197.

⁶⁹ Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 35.

⁷⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 41ff.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, p. 36.

⁷² *ibid.*, pp. 177ff.

⁷³ See p. 197f and Chap. 6, notes 113 and 120.



har and Luria's Kabbala. The Habad doctrine itself can be seen as a transformation of theosophical speculation into „an instrument of psychological analysis and selfknowledge“⁷⁴ in which, that transformation notwithstanding, the ecstatic-cathartic construct retains its validity. The process by which mysticism becomes ethos, which accompanies the transformation, and the emphasis on the „way“ this entails⁷⁵ opens up an understanding of many philosophical-anthropological and psychological and ethical views of Fromm,⁷⁶ and also facilitates access to ecstatic-cathartic constructs in the mysticisms of Asia. So Fromm's thought was given a specific turn by Habad Hasidism, and his most important interests during the twenties--Freud's doctrines, Karl Marx, and Buddhism--were reinforcements of already existing forms of thought within an ecstatic-cathartic conceptual construct.

Freud himself clearly expressed the conviction on which his movement was founded: „Where Id was, there shall Ego be.“⁷⁷ In this process of „enlightenment,“ reason plays a decisive role, but it is a reason that governs the unconscious and irrational passions and frees man of the power of the unconscious. Psychoanalysis is primarily interested in the cathartic aspect of reason, and catharsis is therefore a central concept in Freud. Even after Fromm's break with Jewish orthodoxy, both Buddhism and his study of Marx contributed, each in its own particular way, to his retaining the forms of thought of the ecstatic-cathartic construct in which he had been rooted up to that point. The study of Marx played a greater role as he critically distanced himself from theistic positions: Marx's critique of religion grounded Fromm's humanism,⁷⁸ while Marx's socialism provided him with a secular theory of history.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 341.

⁷⁵ See the reference to the „Kabbala become ethos“ and presented as „mystic psychology.“

⁷⁶ See p. 204f, for further details.

⁷⁷ Quoted from Fromm, „Psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism“ (1959e), p. 81.

⁷⁸ See pp. 215-218.

⁷⁹ See pp. 66-72.

The encounter with Buddhism, and later with Zen, led to the concept of a nontheistic religion as a mysticism of the ONE.⁸⁰

As one surveys the various phenomena in Western intellectual history and other cultures that stimulated Fromm's interest, one notices that they are primarily thinkers, movements, and facts that can be classified as belonging to the ecstatic-cathartic construct insofar as their understanding of man, his world, and his history is concerned. What is invariably involved is a „radical knowledge,“ a „becoming aware“ of man's innermost productive capacities,⁸¹ an „illumination,“⁸² the awakening of {231} „humanitas“⁸³--in short, gnosis that not only does without mysticism⁸⁴ but actively combats it as irrationality.⁸⁵

Before sketching how Fromm's thought is rooted in the cathartic construct by examining his views on man and man's history, we will turn our attention to his reflections on paradoxical logic. The purpose of these comments is not to critically investigate the correctness of his statements but rather to allow elements of his ecstatic-cathartic thought to emerge from what he subsumes under the concept of „paradoxical logic.“⁸⁶

⁸⁰ See pp. 121-124.

⁸¹ See the comments on „awareness“ p. 118f and 146f.

⁸² Cf. the comments on „satori,“ pp. 122-124.

⁸³ Cf. the comments on the humanism concept of Fromm, pp. 85-87.

⁸⁴ The hostility to myth is shared by Fromm and Cohen (see Chap. 6, n. 46), who goes back to the history of the Jewish philosophy of religion and its rationalism that was influenced by the doctrine of negative attributes.

⁸⁵ Fromm's struggle against all irrationality will probably not be seen correctly unless it is understood in the context of his attempt to ground a humanism that will be faithful to the ecstatic-cathartic conceptual model, yet also fully satisfy the demands of *ratio*.

⁸⁶ Cf. the critical observations in notes 135, 152, and 205 to Chap. 4. According to these critical observations, it is hardly possible to reconcile Hegel's dialectic and the paradoxical logic of the East, for the former is not paradoxical. And it is also only with qualifications that the antilogic of Zen Buddhism can be subsumed under



Besides Aristotelian logic, which is based on identity, contradiction, and the excluded middle, there exists, according to Fromm,⁸⁷ another mode of thought whose existence in the West can be traced to Heraclitus and which later shows up as „dialectics“ in the thought of Hegel and Marx. The principal home of this mode of thought, however, is the East--China and India. It can be called paradoxical logic and is a form of thought that assumes, as Heraclitus did, that „the conflict between opposites is the basis of all existence.“⁸⁸ In contrast to Aristotelian logic, paradoxical logic, such as Taoism or Brahmanic philosophy, attempts to find a solution beyond all dualism: „The harmony (unity) consists in the conflicting positions from which it is made up.“⁸⁹

What thinking within an ecstatic-cathartic construct means can be recognized most clearly when one examines the consequences of the summary concept „paradoxical logic.“ An example would be Fromm’s emphasis on the meaning paradoxical logic has for a negative concept of God and his assertion that the philosophy that follows the Veda contains the idea that God is the extreme form of ignorance. Fromm writes: „We see here the connection with the namelessness of the Tao, the nameless name of the God who reveals himself to Moses, of the ‘absolute Nothing’ of Meister Eckhart.“⁹⁰ According to Fromm, another consequence of paradoxical logic is that man can never grasp unity intellectually but only in the „experience of oneness,“⁹¹ so that the mystical experience of the ONE becomes the only adequate form of religion. This means that doctrinal contents and science are not of primary importance; rather, the emphasis is on transforming man and knowing „the right way“

(*halacha*, Tao).⁹² „Paradoxical logic ... led to tolerance ... the paradoxical standpoint ... to the emphasis on transforming man.“⁹³ It is impossible to overlook the closeness of {232} what is here called „paradoxical thinking“ to the ecstatic-cathartic construct, even though the concept „paradoxical logic“ is ultimately unclear. The construct emerges with greater clarity in Fromm’s view of man and his history, however. The following comments will sketch the affinity between the two by comparing Fromm’s statements on man’s nature and history and the typology of the ecstatic-cathartic construct.

In the question concerning man’s self-understanding, the point of departure is the difference between man and animal, which has been established by abundant empirical research. Not only a comparison between this point of departure and traditional definitions of man’s nature⁹⁴ but also a glance at other contemporary philosophical anthropologies⁹⁵ shows that the definition of man as a contradictory being is not a necessary inference from empirical data. It is merely a possible, and perhaps optimal, interpretation. To see man’s nature in his contradictoriness is consonant with the ecstatic-cathartic construct, whose basic motif is the pressure of reality that expresses itself in various dichotomies and is to be overcome. Gnosticism sees men as light souls⁹⁶ that have fallen out of a primordial unity and become estranged from their origin. Fromm believes that man’s dichotomy derives from a break⁹⁷ with the harmony of nature. The contradictoriness results from the fact that man is both part of, and more than, nature. In transcending nature through the consciousness of what

the concept of a paradoxical logic.

⁸⁷ On what follows, cf. Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (1956a), pp. 61-68.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 64f.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁹² Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 65f.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁹⁴ See p. 56.

⁹⁵ Examples would be Max Scheler’s definition of man as „spiritual being,“ Helmut Plessner’s definition of man as „excentric“ being (a definition that comes closest to an ecstatic-cathartic construct), and Arnold Gehlen’s view of man as a „creature of lack.“

⁹⁶ On this and what follows, see p. 228f.

⁹⁷ Cf. the Kabbalistic doctrine of the „breaking of the vessels!“



he is, and through his reason and imagination, man expresses the ecstatic as well as his need for salvation.

In Gnosticism, the fate of the fallen light souls is either total estrangement or the becoming aware of their divine character and the abolition of the estrangement through gnosis. In Fromm's thought, man's reason, which is responsible for his having „fallen out of“ harmony with nature and for the demand that he resolve his dichotomies and the specific human needs in which they result, makes possible two answers: either man can react non-productively and become increasingly estranged; or he can react productively, by mobilizing his powers of reason and love and by attempting to establish a new unity of himself, world, and nature.

The ecstatic-cathartic construct and Fromm's philosophical-anthropological observations also agree that a positive definition of man's nature or essence will be possible only when the „divinity of {233} his own 'true self'“⁹⁸ has been recognized, or when an optimal unfolding of his biophilic capacities has caused him to attain a new unity.

This also indicates the parallel between the two philosophies of history. Apocalypticism is a form of the messianic idea and significantly influenced gnostic cosmogony and theory of history. Fromm sees his view of history as a development of prophetic messianism, so the formal similarity between the ideas is not surprising. It is true, of course, that he applies the cosmogonic model of the original state, *próodos* and *epístrophē*, only to man as humanity and does not reflect on the development of the cosmos. It is different with the assessment of the present historical period as one of necessary estrangement and inescapable evil: in Fromm's theory of history, estrangement is required, and the supposition of a necessary estrangement is consonant with both a gnostic and a humanistic position that does not care to burden man with responsibility for estrangement but does charge him with responsibility for overcoming it. In gnostic-kabbalistic cosmogonies, the „fall of the

sparks“ is the necessary precondition if their positive meaning is to be understood. In Fromm, the fall of man is the condition for the possibility of his discovering his productive capacities of reason and love. In view of Fromm's interpretation of socialism as a secularized messianism, the notion that his socialism has its home in the ecstatic-cathartic model requires no further proof.⁹⁹

The rootedness of Fromm's thought in the ecstatic-cathartic model also becomes apparent when one looks at questions and answers that persist throughout his work. The first fundamental problem, the relation between individual and society, reflects the profound problematics of the sociological autonomy of Jewish groups in society as a whole, and is related to Fromm's own background. The answer to this basic question comprises his entire sociopsychological work, especially the linkage of sociology and psychoanalysis in an original sociopsychological method, the development of the concept „social character,“ and the view of man as primarily a social being. But Fromm's social psychology is more than an answer to the question regarding the relation between individual and society. It must be seen within the framework of the more encompassing question concerning unity in multiplicity and a principle of unity that can bring together the {234} multiplicity of phenomena. It is here that Fromm's rootedness in an ecstatic-cathartic construct becomes apparent, for in such a construct, multiplicity is the emanation of the ONE, and the return to the ONE is salvation from exile, Diaspora, estrangement, dispersal.

A second fundamental question that persists throughout Fromm's work concerns man's capacity for the moral as a capacity for unity in mankind. It was provoked by the brutality of two world wars, the murder of millions of Jews, and the possibility of man's nuclear self-destruction. Fromm's humanistic ethics provides the answer to the fundamental question regarding man's capacity for the moral. It deals with the way, the *halacha*, and the preconditions for taking it. The preconditions lie in a hu-

⁹⁸ Topitsch, *Seelenglaube und Selbstinterpretation*, p. 187.

⁹⁹ See p. 69f.



manism that sees itself as salvation through man's own efforts. Man's selfassertion in his potential goodness is part of this humanism. This self-assertion corresponds to man's potential divinity on the basis of gnostic knowledge or Hasidic self-sanctification. Therefore humanistic ethics has the task of grounding man's capacity for unity against all opposing theories of aggression, and of showing the way to unity. Its general principle of value is man's unfolding to *humanitas*, which, as humanity, represents man's unity, and, as humanness, defines the condition for the possibility of unity.

A third fundamental question that persists and most clearly points to the origin of his thought in the ecstatic-cathartic construct regards the experience of a meaning that encompasses man and his world. Fromm's answer to the fundamental question of an encompassing experience of meaning is humanistic religion as the mystical experience of the ONE. Just as humanistic ethics can name the goal and the path to that goal, so humanistic religion can name the way the ONE is experienced insofar as it means man's oneness with himself and with his human and natural environment. The experience of the ONE is possible only when man renounces all heteronomous influences, negates his dependencies, and thereby becomes aware of his own true, inner self. Only in this self-limitation („emptiness," „nothingness") does the ecstatic quality of the experience of the ONE become possible: the mystic experiences his oneness with his human and natural world as an anticipation of his perfection.¹⁰⁰ Belief and faith in man and his future find support in this encompassing experience of meaning, so {235} that humanistic religion as the mysticism of the ONE makes possible a humanistic ethos through this encompassing experience of meaning.¹⁰¹ For mysticism means the experience of the reconciliation of contradictions and the unity of dif-

ference and diversity, grounds the capacity for the moral in that experience, and directs man's moral striving toward a goal. Similarly, salvation according to the ecstatic-cathartic construct cannot do without the mystical experience of the ONE in oneness.¹⁰²

Dialectics as Form of Thought and Contentless Formulae

The words „dialectics“ and „dialectical“ occur infrequently in Fromm's work. He never commented on „dialectics“ as a form of thought or a method. Yet dialectics as a form of thought plays an eminent role in his work, and it is precisely the understanding of dialectics that we find in Hegel and Marx and that has its home in the ecstatic-cathartic construct.

By dialectics is meant a form of thought, „a three-phase rhythm of original state estrangement and return negation and negation of the negation, etc.“¹⁰³ It is asserted that it is legitimate to interpret reality dialectically as long as such an interpretation cannot be falsified in the sphere of the empirical sciences. Beyond this limit, dialectics becomes contentless formula.¹⁰⁴ The distinctiveness of dialectics lies in its concept of negation, which means that dialectics proceeds by the negation of the given. It thus implies a particular kind of criticism.¹⁰⁵ The detailed demonstration of the presence of dialectical thought in Fromm's work will be limited largely to his critique of religion because it is here that the line dividing it from the use of dialectics as a contentless formula can be easily demonstrated.

In his grounding of humanistic religion, Fromm's point of departure is that humanistic relig-

¹⁰⁰ Cf. the statements on the eschatological nature of mystical knowledge, pp.119-128.

¹⁰¹ Demonstrating the condition for the possibility of a humanistic ethos is not tantamount to grounding a humanistic ethic.

¹⁰² The origin of the concept „totality“ as used by thinkers associated with an ecstatic-cathartic conceptual construct lies in this need for an encompassing experience of meaning.

¹⁰³ Topitsch, *Marxismus und Gnosis*, p. 258.

¹⁰⁴ See p. 226.

¹⁰⁵ See p. 227f.



ion is the negation of authoritarian religion. Therefore only a revolutionary character--the dialectical counterconcept of the authoritarian character--can do justice to the concern of humanistic religion. The dialectical conjunction of humanistic religion and revolutionary character, and of authoritarian religion and authoritarian character, means that the antithetical entities contradict each other and are therefore incompatible. This dialectical conjunction also means that humanistic {236} religion and revolutionary character are possible only in the process that negates authoritarian religion and the authoritarian character.¹⁰⁶ Understanding dialectics as a process implies a historico-theoretical aspect that, in Fromm, takes the form of a theory of the history of the concept of God.

Within the dialectical process, the epithets „humanistic“ and „revolutionary“ have an antiauthoritarian function, for it is only the principle revolutionary“ disobedience that can break the dominance of obedience to irrational authorities in the long run.¹⁰⁷ This dialectical view of man's dependence on authority results from an investigation of irrational authority relations and has its justification insofar as such irrational relations can in fact be dissolved only by opposition (or contradiction). Dialectics as a form of thought is thus perfectly valid where irrational authority relations can be diagnosed. But doubts about the validity of dialectical thinking arise when rational authority relations are no longer considered possible and dialectics is used pervasively. It could be shown¹⁰⁸ that while Fromm distinguishes between rational and irrational authority relations and maintains that the former do in fact exist because they are postulates of everyday life, his systematic discussion of the revolutionary character and humanistic religion entirely ignores the possibility of rational authority and argues that authoritarian character and authoritarian religion,

and revolutionary character and humanistic religion, are always dialectically conjoined. The daily experience of rational authority notwithstanding, he thus maintains the validity of a dialectic that is really the constraint and dictate of a form of thought. The result is that dialectics becomes a manipulable contentless formula when it is applied to phenomena of rational authority.

If dialectics as a form of thought is applied to all authority relations without exception, it will degenerate into a contentless formula. This observation becomes a criticism of Fromm in all those instances where he no longer has faith in the possibility of rational authority relations, yet fails to prove that they are impossible. The following paired opposites, all of which derive from the problem of authority relations and which Fromm unjustifiably sees exclusively as dialectical contradictions, could be named: authoritarian : revolutionary character; authoritarian : humanistic religion; theism : nontheism; theonomy : autonomy. {237}

The criticism here is not of the contrasts as such, but rather of the definition of the contradiction as necessarily a dialectical one. It is not disputed that an irrational authority relation can very often be discovered behind the first concept of the pair of opposites. It is disputed, however, that the pairs of opposites are incompatible *a priori*: obedience is not invariably submission to an irrational authority, nor are theism and theonomy always the same as heteronomy. With his postulate of a rational authority relation, Fromm himself indicates a line that separates a certain form of thought as a means of interpreting reality, and the claim of a reality that can be experienced and is subject to scientific scrutiny. This reality represents a line beyond which the validity of the form of thought used up to that point cannot extend. If it is not respected, the form of thought degenerates into a contentless formula.

A second line that separates form of thought and dialectics as contentless formula emerges in the application of dialectics to the understanding of the

¹⁰⁶ See the comments on the attitude of the revolutionary character toward obedience and disobedience, pp. 95-97.

¹⁰⁷ See p. 97f.

¹⁰⁸ See pp. 89-91, 198, 104f.



history of the concept of God.¹⁰⁹ For Fromm, the history of that concept is a history in which man increasingly learns to understand himself as ultimate reality and highest value. Man's progressive self-knowledge goes along with a process of negation: to the extent that every statement about God is negated, man understands that he himself is God insofar as he is a genuinely human being.¹¹⁰ This idea has its origin in the ban on images in Judaism; it is given greater depth in the Jewish philosophy of religion and especially in the doctrine of negative attributes.¹¹¹ Fromm uses it in a religio-critical sense: the recognition that statements about God are impossible, and the critique of any idea about God that transcends man ground the humanistic view of man and his world as a reality that exists wholly through and of itself. The relation between God and man must therefore be expressed dialectically. The goal is the freedom and independence of man from a God whose *a priori* meaning is unfreedom and dependence. In the case of free and independent man, this process of negation does away with the contradiction. A critique of this view coincides with the critique of Fromm's concept of authority, but this is not to say that his conviction that history legitimizes the process of negation has already been addressed.¹¹²

The humanistic view of man and world in history is grounded in {238} a critique of religion that can be inferred from the history of the concept of God. The line Fromm traces in the history of the concept is no more than a presentation of the development of a negative theology, and makes visible a process by which the concept of God becomes increasingly less meaningful. An interpretation of this religio-critical development as a process of negation within a dialectical triad seems plausible and is judged correct and valid by Fromm, for he interprets this line of development in religion as the de-

velopment of religion generally. The religio-critical and humanistic interpretation of the history of negative theology therefore becomes legitimate only if the general course of religion is understood as a dialectical process and the development of negative theology up to nontheistic mysticism is seen as a process of negation within the dialectical triad.

Apart from important critical questions concerning the function of the process of negation in the history of negative theology,¹¹³ the view of the history of the concept of God as a process of negation must be taken exception to because no dialectical triad can be demonstrated. Dialectics as a form of thought that makes it possible to interpret the history of the concept of God as that of a process of negation implies an original state that can neither be postulated nor proven. The *Urgeschichte* of religion as Fromm himself outlines it¹¹⁴ knows neither an original state that might correspond in some respects to a final one, nor such a thing as a falling out of this original state. There is only the history of the concept of God in which certain developmental phases and tendencies are recognizable, but these cannot be subsumed under one heading. What one can observe is that the concept of God and its critique depend on biological, economic, political, and sociocultural factors. And in the history of the concept of God and in the history of the critique of religion, one can certainly discover a tendency toward „demystification,“ „desacralization,“ „demythologization,“ and other forms of man's claim to reason as he seeks to reach intellectual maturity. For Fromm, this tendency is the point of departure for an interpretation of the history of 'the concept of God. But a tendency that can be documented

¹⁰⁹ Cf. pp. 106-112.

¹¹⁰ Cf. Fromm's formulation in *The Art of Loving* (1956a), p. 59: „God is I, inasmuch as I am human.“

¹¹¹ See pp. 183-188.

¹¹² See p. 109f.

¹¹³ Such critical questions would, on the one hand, have to address the understanding of *theologia negativa* generally and its specific function within the religion in which it develops. On the other, they would have to analyze whether certain contents and phenomena can justifiably be interpreted in terms of a *theologia negativa*. See the beginnings of such a critique, pp. 109-112 and notes 121 and 123 to Chap. 4.

¹¹⁴ Especially in *You Shall Be as Gods* (1966a), pp. 17-62; see pp. 106-109.



historically neither allows the kind of unambiguous inference that would be necessary to ground a theory of history nor justifies the interpretation of the history of the concept of God as a process of negation. An interpretation of this history as a process of negation {239} becomes possible only if that process can be shown to be part of a dialectical triad. It is precisely here that Fromm fails, for he does not see man's earliest development according to the ecstatic-cathartic model, as an original state and *proodos*, but philo- and ontogenetically, in accordance with a biomorphous¹¹⁵ conceptual construct,¹¹⁶ as a continuing process of developing consciousness. This model is based on discoveries in those sciences that investigate man's origins and see the development of man and of mankind as a gradual detachment from ties to nature and mother. In line with this biomorphous approach, the goal of development is judged to be total freedom and independence. Because Fromm interprets this process dialectically, he combines two irreconcilable conceptual constructs, for the dialectical interpretation is necessarily tied to the ecstatic-cathartic construct. And in the interpretation of the history of the concept of God as a process of negation, dialectics becomes a contentless formula--that is, a method of interpreting history that has no genuine basis. If, however, the history of the concept of God cannot be interpreted dialectically, a humanistic interpretation of the critique of religion loses its justification, for then the critique of religion does not necessarily imply a negation of the concept of God. Theism is not a contradiction of humanism, nor can there be an *a priori* humanistic interpretation of it.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ The term „biomorphous“ should be understood in analogy to „technomorphous“ and „sociomorphous,“ and refers to a conception of man and his history that is oriented around the empirically discoverable biological data of the individual, and of mankind.

¹¹⁶ This does not mean that Fromm does not also think in line with the ecstatic-cathartic model when it comes to the *urgeschichtliche* development (in his theory of history, he does so exclusively). On this, see n. 101 to Chap. 4.

¹¹⁷ On this, cf. p. 104f.

The Universal Claim of Dialectical Thinking and Its Critique

An individual's life from birth to death represents a development that takes place in accordance with certain rules. A fundamental rule whose existence can be demonstrated empirically, especially by psychology, states that development is possible only as a permanent process of detachment. Accordingly, independence and freedom can only be achieved if a previous condition of security is given up and an identification that was possible hitherto is lost. If man does not accomplish this permanent exodus, or if it is prevented, developmental malfunctioning and physical and psychic illnesses set in. Man's life rule accordingly states that the unfolding of human life is possible only where what prevailed hitherto is negated and left behind. The process of growth implies a process of negation. This fundamental rule of all human development, the knowledge of which is shared by all cultures, forms the {240} empirical basis of a biomorphous conceptual construct that helps Fromm interpret his sociopsychological data in particular. In his investigation of individual productive and nonproductive character orientations in the process of assimilation and socialization, the biomorphous construct was clearly influential. The distinction between a syndrome of growth and one of decay can be traced to it, and it is also used in the interpretation of historical developments: the history of mankind is interpreted not only dialectically but also biomorphously, as a process of the increasing unfolding of his gift of reason, which distinguishes man from animal. The same holds for developments in intellectual history, as the understanding of the history of the concept of God illustrates. Because the biomorphous construct also implies a process of negation, its affinity with the ecstatic-cathartic construct and its form of thought, dialectics, becomes understandable. But the difference between the two must not be overlooked, for while the process of negation is part of the triad of original state, *proodos* and *epistrophē*, the bio-



morphous construct knows no such movement. It has a more or less direct development (which may have an internal dialectical structure) whose peculiarity is that the process of evolution is also always a process in which what was valid heretofore is negated.

The absence of the dialectical triad in the biomorphous construct results in an even more important difference in the understanding of the process of negation. In the biomorphous construct, negation means the negation of what gave rise to the following stage, whether this development is understood as circular (the rhythm of nature and the seasons) or evolutionary (the orthogenetic view of the development of prehuman life, for example). In both a detailed examination of the individual developmental stages and the global perspective on the entire course from its beginnings to its final state, negation in the biomorphous construct always means that the new negates the beginning or what precedes, and that the development can be understood both as a process of unfolding and one of negation. In dialectical thought, the process of negation is something different. Here negation ultimately always means the negation of a negation. When a development is understood dialectically, what exists is always and necessarily estranged and to be seen as the negation of an original {241} condition. Interpreting a development dialectically as a process of negation means negating what existed before and exists now as a negation of an original state, and to abolish with this negation of the negation the negation of the original state. In contrast to the biomorphous construct, the dialectical interpretation makes possible an encompassing interpretation of the process of negation because that is the only interpretation that can interpret the present as a negation of the original state, a negation that must be negated in turn.

A dialectical interpretation of the process of negation must always be in line with, and legitimized by, empirically discoverable data, and the competing interpretation of the process of negation according to the biomorphous construct must be taken into account. The few attempts in Fromm's

work to demonstrate processes of negation in and through empirical data suggest that the processes of negation should be interpreted biomorphously rather than dialectically. This applies both to the demonstration of man's historical development as a process during which irrational ties and irrational authorities are negated in favor of freedom and independence,¹¹⁸ and to the setting forth of the history of the concept of God,¹¹⁹ for in both of these historical developments, the empirical data do not indicate that the processes of negation should be understood dialectically. Instead, the data invite an understanding of the historical lines of development as a process of negation according to a biomorphous construct. Fromm interprets these two historical developments¹²⁰ and all processes of negation dialectically because his thought is anchored in a conceptual construct that interprets man, his history, and his world ecstatically-cathartically. We have shown that this interpretive approach and its form of thought, dialectics, differ from the interpretation of sociopsychological findings that flows from the data themselves--namely, a biomorphous understanding.

The difference in the interpretive possibilities is not the same as the difference between the empirical findings of social psychology on the one hand, and the philosophical-anthropological reflections and views on humanistic religion and ethics on the other. The question regarding the significance and validity of Fromm's insights and thoughts is not decided along the line that separates these two kinds of scientific statements. Instead, it is necessary {242} always to inquire critically in both areas what the nexus between form of thought or conceptual construct and empirically discoverable data may be. A

¹¹⁸ See pp. 102-104.

¹¹⁹ See pp. 106-112.

¹²⁰ The dialectical interpretation of the process of negation of authoritarian relations of dependency means that there is no room for the everyday experience of rational authority. The dialectical interpretation of the history of the concept of God results in a specific (i.e., dialectical) understanding of *theologia negativa*, religion, theonomy, and autonomy.



criticism of certain interpretations of philosophical-anthropological assumptions does not mean that these assumptions are necessarily false. First, the interpretations of the assumptions must be viewed critically, from the perspective of the forms of thought that underlie them. It must be asked whether the interpretations in question optimally correspond to the empirical data that are relevant to the assumptions, or, whether they must be revised by a conceptual construct that is more adequate to the data. That it is easier to criticize in the area of humanistic ethics and religion than in the field of sociopsychological findings is obvious, but such an observation does not imply a separation in principle of the two areas of discourse. Neither a positivistic, selfimposed limitation to „value-free“ insights nor the view that evaluative and interpretive statements about empirical findings are independent does justice to the question being asked here.

The critique here set forth applies to all dialectical thought that derives from an ecstatic-cathartic conceptual construct and claims universal validity. In conclusion, it raises the question of the extent to which the claim to universality of dialectical thought is a presupposition or a consequence of Fromm's religio-critical concept of humanism. What function does dialectics have in grounding humanism? The further question of the extent to which dialectically interpreted findings can also be relevant to a Christian understanding of man and world, especially to a theological ethics, hinges on the answer that is given to that question.

In Fromm's work, dialectics not only has the task of interpreting, ordering, and evaluating empirically discoverable data. His primary object in setting forth his critique of religion was to ground an encompassing theory of man and his history. This is especially true of the interpretation of the history of the concept of God as a dialectical process of negation. When dialectics is turned into a universally valid principle of all being and becoming, the questions and problems of man are given an answer that man could not provide on his own--that is, in the absence of dialectics as a theory that encompasses all reality. But because dialectics grasps

all that exists as the negation of an original state, and because what exists, being the negation of an original state, can only be sublated and {243} brought to a new identity if this negation is negated in turn, there is posited a theory that is universal because it encompasses all reality, in which an entity that transcends this reality does not exist, and where such an entity is not required for a solution. Universalizing dialectics as a form of thought thus satisfies the concern of Gnosticism from which it derives and which wishes to allow man to become aware of his divine nature as a task that he sets and must accomplish himself. Understood as a universal theory, dialectics grounds a humanism that is religio-critical *a priori*. Fromm's humanism is essentially tied to dialectical thought.

A further question regards the significance Fromm's dialectical thinking has for a Christian theology and ethics if dialectics is indispensable to the grounding of his religio-critical humanism concept. From a formal point of view, the following observation can be made: Fromm's religio-critical humanism concept is incompatible with a theistic-Christian perspective, to the extent dialectics is used universally. A theological critique of Fromm's religio-critical humanism concept would therefore set in at the point where the universalizing of dialectics encounters the resistance of empirical data (as in the case of the concept of authority or the history of the concept of God) and causes dialectics to degenerate into a contentless formula. Theological criticism, on the other hand, has its limit where givens (such as the overcoming of an irrational authority relation) call for a dialectical interpretation.

Fromm's significance, and that of his sociopsychological insights, his philosophical-anthropological reflections, and his religio-critical and ethical views for a Christian theology and a theological ethics have their limit where his form of thought, dialectics, becomes the universal theory of an ecstatic-cathartic understanding of man and world that is rooted in gnosis and in which the negation of the negation represents, as a critical theory, the principle of self-redemption. Such a universally dialectical view can be contrasted with an understand-



ing of man and world that is oriented according to a biomorphous construct that sees not merely estrangement and negation but also creation and affirmation in what exists, and in which redemption

means not only critique and negation but also healing and being healed. The final part of this book, will show in some detail the line along which these two views touch on each other. {247}

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Ursrainer Ring 24, D-72076 Tuebingen / Germany
E-Mail: frommfunk[at-symbol]aol.com.