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On the Relativity of Conceptualization

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“On the Relativity of Conceptualization” maybe was written in 1975 in connection with *To Have Or to Be?* as an „Appendix I” to a planned book particularly about Meister Eckhart and Karl Marx and religious concepts. The book was never realized. Other parts were published posthumously (cf. E. Fromm, 1994e [1974-78] and E. Fromm, 1992s [1974]). First publication in: Fromm Forum (English version) No. 16 (2012), Tuebingen (Selbstverlag) 2012.

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In the following¹ I want to show that there is a deep affinity between the „religious“ and anthropological views held by the Buddha, Master Eckhart, Karl Marx and Albert Schweitzer. In order to facilitate the understanding I begin with a discussion of the relativity of conceptualization. The word and the concept in the having mode is a fixed entity, which does not go beyond itself. In the being mode the word and the concept are only signs which point to a knowledge which as such may not be conscious to the one who speaks and thinks. To put it differently, words and concepts have only a relative significance and must be understood in their tentativeness. The failure to grasp the relative meaning of words, concepts and thoughts results in the words becoming ossified or dead, like those who take them for realities.

The first point to observe is that the patriarchal cultures developed a fantastic overestimation of thought and word (*logos*). In the Vedas words and letters have their own dynamism and are the creative principle, very similar to the power of words as creators in the *Kabbalah*. In the Old Testament the world is created by the word, the woman is given birth by man, as in Greek mythology Athene is born from Zeus' head. Platonism and its development up to the „realist“ scholastics and idealist philosophers, are based on the same overestimation of thought and word, maintaining that only ideas (words) are real, while the material reality is not.

How did one arrive at such absurdity as to make the thought the only reality and the only creative principle?

The answer is simple once one has understood the war between the sexes and the establishment of male dominance as a central fact in history, reflected in religion, law, and in the relations between men and women. In natural reality the woman, as mother, can give birth; the male cannot do so; he is constitutionally sterile, in the sense of not being able to grow the child in his body, carry it and to give birth to it. The male has only one other form of creation, that through the mind, through the word, through ideas.

¹ This chapter presents an hypothesis in its „raw“ form, without the necessary theoretical refinement and without reference to the literature related to this very complex problem. I have decided to publish the thought in its present form because it is necessary as a preparation for the following. I plan, together with Mihailo Marković, to do more justice to the problem in a later publication which will also contain more historical examples for the hypothesis.



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After defeating the ruling, or at least equal figure of the woman = mother, and establishing male supremacy, he had to make 'creation by the word' the substitute for 'creation by the womb,' theoretical construction for natural creation, technique for cooperation with nature.² Within roughly six thousand years he built a civilization in which he created a second world by his thought (technique).

It is necessary to recall these facts in order to appreciate the inflatory overevaluation of word and thought in the patriarchal world.

The next point to consider – and it constitutes the central issue of our problem – concerns a fact to which too little attention has been paid. I refer to the fact that *every near theory arrived at by a creative thinker is by necessity to a smaller or larger extent erroneous*. Why is this so?

Every society has its own mode of perceiving the world, a mode which is rooted in the practice of life in the socio-economic, political structure, and in the cultural heritage of the society. These concepts are the more similar in various societies the more similar their respective structures are, and vice versa. For things or experiences which do not exist in a given culture there are no words, and there is no awareness of them. For one, however, living in a given culture, its words, concepts, experiences, are nothing but „common sense,“ self-evident and not at all historically and sociologically conditioned.

Here is an example: At a point where human individuation had reached a certain threshold, it became an intellectual and emotional necessity to form the idea of ONE, in contrast to the manifoldness of things and the manifoldness of desires. ONE became the highest value and goal of intellectual and affective life. In a hierarchical feudal society, the ONE as the „highest value“ or „supreme goal“ had necessarily to be expressed in terms of „the King,“ or the „King of Kings.“ Thus in some phases of Indian religious development, just as in the religions of the Near East, it was necessary to express the concept „the highest“ in the concept „King-Father-Creator.“

What was new in the Biblical concept was the idea that the ONE was not a thing, not namable, not portrayable in pictures or statues, that he was not only numerically different from the *many* gods, but had an entirely different quality. But this new discovery had to be expressed in the contemporary concept of God = King and Ruler. This development found a fruitful soil in the feudal Middle Ages, with its Emperors, Kings and Popes, so that the concept of the One continued to be expressed by the thought concept God as the King and Ruler, who punishes and rewards etc.

Thus the old concept of God reflecting the concepts and social structure of earlier historical epochs, is accepted as the essence and not as a historically accidental thought; the old thought concept choked the creative new element of the inexpressible One and God-the-King became an idol, a figure above Man, to whom he had to submit in order to be protected and rewarded. The genuine and new experience originally expressed in the concept God, became lost because the word had replaced the original experience. As a consequence a „godless religion“ has become an unthinkable paradox, just as a

² In the Babylonian myth of creation the Great Mother (*Tiamath*) rules the world until her sons kill her and establish creation by word; the Biblical story of creation begins where the Babylonian story ends. Cf. the Analysis of the two myths of Creation in E. Fromm, *The Forgotten Language*, New York 1951 [and E. Fromm, "The Male Creation", in E. Fromm, *Love, Sexuality, and Matrarchy. About Gender*, ed. and with an introduction by Rainer Funk, New York (Fromm International Publishing Corporation) 1997, pp. 46-75.]



„religious atheist“ or an „atheistic mystic,“ and this in spite of the fact that one of the greatest religions of the world, Buddhism, is precisely a „godless religion.“

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to assume that the old thought concept is only carried as ideological baggage because of the inertia of the tradition. The idolatric concept of God would not have such vitality were it not for the fact that it is immensely satisfying to believe that one is protected and rewarded by an all-powerful Father-God, who only demands that one submits to him or to the bureaucracy of those who claim to be his spokesmen.

Not only ones wish for success and security is satisfied by the conviction that one is allied with God = the Superpower. Even more important, to believe in God's love and concern is a comfort of unfathomable depth, especially if as in Catholicism and, less visible, also in Judaism, the fatherly elements in God are blended with motherly traits. Indeed, if in any culture in which man has not achieved full independence and simultaneously solidarity with others as his brothers, the genuine belief in God is lost, its place is taken by the belief in technique, the state, the nation, the 'party,' and unscrupulous and often devilish leaders.

Many other examples could be given which show that the thought concepts used by a creative thinker are necessarily part of the thought pattern characteristic of a given society. What then happens if a creative thinker develops a new idea?

He *must* think in terms of the thought concepts and the words of his particular culture; they are the building stones out of which he must build his system. (This holds true also for the creative artist. Since the existing concepts are historically conditioned, they have no universal validity; they are time-bound and culture-bound. But even for the creative thinker they are common sense, 'logical,' they cannot be questioned, hence they are not doubted. (The doubt begins in periods of social and cultural change, when old institutions together with old thought concepts begin to be questionable.) Yet the creative thinker has a new and original thought, he wants to express.

How can he do this?

He must express the new thought in traditional and historically conditioned thought concepts. The words are the old ones, the essence is new. Of course, the new creative thought in its entirety is not necessarily so completely foreign to the conventional thought concepts that it cannot be expressed at all in the existing conceptual system. Hence at times the distortion is small, at others is is very large.

I am dealing here with the new thought which is not expressable in the given thought medium. Here the thinker is in a peculiar conflict. He „knows“ what is still unconscious to him; he senses a truth but he cannot yet give it adequate verbal expression, because the new truth is unthinkable from the standpoint of the old concepts. In addition, the creative thinker is not a thought system; he is a human being with his or her conflicts and contradictions, with his or her doubts, fears, longings. The thinker may be afraid to tell the full truth, or even to think it, because of the real or imagined dangers; he or she may revise the most creative thought to win greater fame or power. Yet almost always the attempt is made to deny such contradictions and inconsistencies and to give the impression that the system is a consistent whole, and if there were any contradictions, they are solved in the latest formulation.

Both with regard to the culturally and personally conditioned contradictions, we have to divine and recognize what the thinker has not yet formulated; we have to psychoana-



lyze his thought system, in order to understand his „unconscious knowledge.“ Is this not an impossible task, especially when the writer died many hundreds of years ago and cannot answer our questions?

It may seem to be an impossible task, but the difficulties are not as insurmountable as they appear to be at first glance, provided one uses an adequate method. This method is essentially that of the psychoanalytic approach which looks for the hidden and unconscious meaning of consciously expressed concepts. This method has its own technique and also a special attitude on the part of the one who tries to understand analytically the utterances of another person.

Generally speaking the technique requires the art of listening to the many hints a creative thinker gives us about his „unconscious thoughts.“ These hints are: immanent contradictions in the authors work; omission of thoughts which according to his system the author should have expressed; overemphasis on certain points which suggest the suspicion that the author is actually doubting what he says; or on the other hand, a lack of emphasis on certain traditional thoughts which the author should have emphasized much more if his heart were in the thought; the use of certain words which are slightly different from those generally used; or denial of a concept by creating another one to which it is made inferior.

Equally important is the knowledge of contemporary thought, the rewards and punishments given to orthodox and heterodox views respectively. (In fact, the analysis of thought and style is a method for the analysis of a thinker's character.)

The method of „literary analysis“ is not different from analyzing the utterance of a person in private conversation.³ It reduces the importance usually given to the conscious utterances and concentrates on the hidden content the speaker did not intend to express or of which he had no awareness.

Another aspect of this psychoanalytic approach to thought systems may be said to be one of respect for the author; that is to try to understand what he really wanted to say rather than what he actually and often mistakenly did say. This respect requires something more; the wish to help him and to care for him. This means to put oneself in his situation, to feel the constraints he was under, to think with him as it were, to follow his thought as if it were one's own; it means helping him to give full birth to a thought, which he could not yet release as fully born, because conventional thought was blocking him. This does not imply to be credulous and naive. On the contrary, it implies also to be suspicious, to see through the devious ways in which the author wants to protect himself from criticism or real dangers, and to be popular and rewarded.

How can one arrive at this kind of caring objectivity? In the first place it is possible only on the basis of being, of the productive participation in the author's thought, in which my understanding the author means becoming his co-author. More specifically it requires a different method from that of usual interpretation. One must give up the chronological methods which assume that the latest word of the author is his best and his final one. Very often this is not at all the case. The author may have been at his

³ Actually this method of literary analysis is used today in a very mundane sector: the study of diplomatic notes and official statements. The text is examined most carefully in order to discover what it indicates by a certain word, or omission, or change from a previous statement; one intention is to grasp the meaning of the text beyond the obvious formulation. However, in this case the hidden meaning is usually intended, not unconscious.



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best when he was in his twenties and unknown, and then may have betrayed himself and been at his worst when he was fifty and at the height of his popularity. This is not rarely the case, yet the historian of ideas is prone to believe that the last word is the best one. Or the author may express himself very conventionally in most of his writings, but here and there say things which are „obscure,“ „paradoxical,“ or perhaps momentary „aberrations.“ But maybe it is the other way around and the obscurities are the expressions of the real man, while the lucid writings are the embellishments. One must approach the author by going around and around him, as it were; by soaking oneself with him, until one becomes (approximately) him and then can make a statement which is rooted in the center of his thinking.

Does this method not lead to a purely subjective, arbitrary method of interpretation? Does it not simply discard the explicit thought of the thinker for the sake of the „true“ thought?

Indeed, this can happen when applied by those who do not have the qualifications to use this method properly such as objectivity, thorough knowledge of the author's writings, his life, his personality, his time, critical capacity and a fully alive relation to the problems the author deals with; the method requires the capacity to understand the unsaid, and the repressed. These qualifications are the same as a psychoanalyst needs to have for the understanding of a patient. They are necessary for a method in which the „participation“ is the instrument for observation, not „objective“ tests formed in analogy to tile methods of the natural sciences.

The most important guide for the understanding of the true meaning are the consequences of a statement for the practice of life. If Stalin's version of Communism spoke in the name of Marx, of the ideas of a brotherhood of man, of justice, etc., the unreality and the purely ideological character of these concepts could easily be recognized by the deeds of those who pronounced the concept; furthermore one could see that the concept served only as a screen to cover the reality of the system. Let us think on the other hand of a deeply conservative person who is attracted by a conservative or even a reactionary thought system. He may believe that those who speak for „progress“ are actually bound to do great damage to the human person and that they advocate, in the name of progress or revolution, a system which destroys the human substance. If we study his personal attitude and his behavior we may find that he is the real humanist while many a Leftist might be found to be a hater and destroyer. There are only a few men and women, such as Marx, Thoreau, Luxemburg, Schweitzer, who were aware of the dangers of progress and at the same time were seeking a new forward way, rather than believing that by standing still the evils of unrestricted industrialization could be avoided. Thus it happens that two thinkers may speak and think in diametrically opposed thought concepts and yet have the same basic attitude and the same ideas about man and his well-being.

Considering the necessary discrepancy between overt and hidden meaning of a text, ones approach must be to expect contradictions – those between the new and the historically given and those within the thinker as a person; the task of understanding demands that the contradiction is recognized and made explicit. In the history of thought the opposite is often done; one assumes that the writer, being one person, must also have one mind and one set of ideas. Hence the attempt is made to ignore contradictions or, if they are too blatant, to „explain away“ what does not fit the idea of the one system. By using this method it often happens that the most important and creative



thoughts are not given the importance they deserve and the traditional, conventional thoughts are considered to be the essence of the system.

The history of Eckhart interpretation is an excellent example of the two-dimensional method of interpretation. Eckhart's writings express thoughts varying from orthodox scholastic to unmistakably non-theistic thoughts. Almost all contemporary Eckhart interpreters, if they pay attention to his non-theistic thoughts at all, take a systematizing and harmonizing position; they interpret the rare heterodox views in the light of his dominant orthodox views, and thus as „allegories,“ or „images,“ or at the most as views that have to be explained in the light of his overall monotheism. The Papal bull which accused Eckhart of heresy saw further, while Eckhart himself asserted that he never transcended the orthodox frame of reference. On the other hand, Schopenhauer (see later) saw clearly that the „marginal“ views were of the essence of Eckhart's thought, while Eckhart himself could not help clothing them in the garments of orthodox formulations. In Eckhart's time and in his position as the general vicar of the Dominican order in Germany, a world picture without God was not only „unspeakable“ but also „unthinkable.“ Four hundred years later Spinoza could very well think of a world without God in the traditional religious sense, but he had to express it in a theological definition of God by equating God with nature, and besides that in Latin, the protective language of the scholars.

The greater approximation to the truth in some respects which occurs in the historical process, does not exclude the fact that new historical conditions give rise to new illusions and distortions. Our present period offers a good example. While the natural sciences have led to the de-mythologization of God, they have through their practical consequence – technique – erected new myths: that the goal of life is the infinite growth of production and consumption, that egotism leads to harmony and happiness. These new myths will be debunked in their turn when radical social and political changes occur, which make it possible to see through these fallacies.

Is there no end to this process of ever new illusions? Is the truth conceivable? Is it humankind's fate never to know the truth?

That there are limits to our knowledge which are not caused by one's incapacity for critical thinking or our need for illusion, is a central problem of philosophy which I am not qualified to discuss; but this is not the kind of truth I am speaking of. I am concerned here with the truth that is recognizable but which remains veiled because of the human incapacity to think straight and to give up illusions. As far as this latter concept of truth is concerned, I believe there is a definite answer. Human beings can recognize the truth when they have become entirely independent, relying on themselves, having their center in themselves, living in the mode of being; when they have no need to have illusions, to be greedy, to shy away from the truth. This can only happen when men and women have organized their society in such a way that it does not require them to have illusions; this is in a society whose practice does not contradict its ideology; i. e. in a society of solidarity, justice, brotherly love, in which the full development of each person is inseparable from the full development of the whole society. But since all human beings are one family, the identity of values and practice must not only exist in one society but in the whole world. Truth, like peace, is indivisible. If only one nation were left to be the object of exploitation, this fact would poison the capacity of all other nations, races and religions to be free from illusions, hence from recognizing the truth.

However, I must warn against a misunderstanding. The conclusion could be drawn that



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it is useless to seek for the truth since it cannot be recognized until the time in which all social contradictions are solved and no falsehood is needed. This basically nihilistic conclusion is rooted in the spirit of alienation and indifference and the assumption that history makes Man and not Man that makes history. Indeed each person can approach an optimum of truth, to the extent to which he liberates himself, knows himself, is himself. Only a very selfish and narcissistic person will reason that he would rather not know the truth at all, unless he can know the whole truth. In the having orientation the latter is what matters, in the being orientation it is the process of acquiring greater clarity and awareness that matters.

There are questions which the human mind cannot answer, and since the answer does not contribute to the greater well-being of human beings, this limitation of human knowledge is of no decisive consequence. The truth however of that which is knowable, will be found only when theory and practice, when norms and their realization are identical. History is a process of approximation to the truth; it will be recognized – and not repressed any more – in the „Messianic Time,“ the time of the full unfolding of the human race.