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Narcissism, Humanism, and the Revolutionary Character in Erich Fromm’s Work¹

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Scholars of Marxist persuasion argue that the ultimate task of political theory is to help create the revolutionary subject and transform society more generally. To do so, they go on to argue, political theory needs to engage with the historicity of domination, i.e., to uncover and deconstruct the infra-conscious complicity between historically specified conditions of existence and the cognitive schemata of perception these conditions have produced to their own advantage (see further Bratsis, 2002). But whilst external, social realities exert immense pressures upon the apparatus of perception, so much so that they often become our ‘second nature’ (see, e.g., Bourdieu, 1991), no historicity of domination can afford to miss the role of ‘first nature’ or ‘prehistory’: ‘what must have gone on *before* the subject could establish a relationship with “external reality”—the process which ... acquires the form of the I’s absolute act of positing (of itself as) the object’ (Žižek, 1992/2008: 57, original emphasis). Whence the necessity to shift the theoretical starting point from the ways in, and the degree to, which perception comes to adjust itself to forces external to the self, to how the content and manifestation of external forces are moulded in accordance or, at least, in dialogue with esoteric perceptive dispositions, those hidden in the region of instincts (Craib, 1990). In fact, as Slavoj Žižek argues, ‘the only way to save historicity from the fall into historicism, into the notion of the linear succession of “historical epochs”, is to conceive these epochs as a series of ultimately failed attempts to deal with the same “unhistorical” traumatic kernel’ (Žižek, 1992/2001: 94; see also Butler, 1997).

Building on a sympathetic appraisal of Erich Fromm’s writings, this chapter argues for tracing the ‘unhistorical traumatic kernel’ of domination within the cognitive, psychic, and moral quandaries of narcissism. Against the psychoanalytical and sociological orthodoxies of his time, Fromm walks the theoretical tightrope between the instinctual and the societal within the socialised psyche, thus theorising narcissism as a catch-all semiotic metaphor which weds the innermost recesses of the ordinary self with

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the various layers of the outer socio-political world, and yet does not collapse the former into the latter or *vice versa*. With the selfsame caution, Fromm's psychoanalytic imagination further allows for interpreting the self outside the mainstream, individual clinical setting, and as a broader cultural-anthropological category. Finally, whether with reference to the individual or the collective self, Fromm pays equal attention to the material efficacy of symbolic power and the symbolic efficacy of material power, as they associate with one another in the manner of a continuous dialectical becoming, also making central to such enquiry plentiful cases of explicit, physical violence.

His view of the multiple and multifarious ways in which innate narcissistic drives may correlate with mass evildoing should not be misread as a fatalistic apologia for modernity, nor as an outright condemnation of particular cohorts or individuals gone awry. Whereas, for example, Freud (1941/2002) prophesied the relapse of 'pre-Holocaust' civilisation into barbarism by evoking what he saw as the ultimate impotence of any conceivable society fully and permanently to tame man's aggressive physiological and biological endowments, and whilst the mainstream Freudo-Marxists of the so-called 'Frankfurt School'² anchor their retrospective account of Nazism in personality traits inculcated by authoritarian right-wing families during early childhood (see Adorno *et al.*, 1950), Fromm shifts the blame to the grave politico-economic conditions which forced the overwhelming majority of Germans into authoritarian relations of dependency (see, e.g., Fromm, 1941/1994: 205-238). Whatever remnants of psychologism one may manage to trace in Fromm's work, they hardly suffice to overshadow his sociological insights, or to downgrade such insights to postmodernist elegies for the 'death of man'. '[T]here are probably hundreds of Hitlers amongst us who would come forth if their historical hour arrived', he argues (Fromm, 1973/1984: 574), and certainly millions who would willingly join the ranks in the face of 'psychological scarcity' (Fromm, 1949/1986), but '[f]or Fromm, man is by no means dead: he has simply not yet reached adulthood' (Ingleby, 2006: xx).³ And, paradoxically enough, the route out of infantile attachment to the irrational authority of others and the ensuing immoralities passes through man's own need for narcissistic relatedness. To help humanity reach its potential for inner transformation and freedom, Fromm concludes, critical theory must extend beyond studying the characterological variations behind given types of conduct. It also needs to awaken and revolutionise man by revealing hidden realities and putting forth the moral philosophy of humanism, which can uniquely bind individuals in harmony and love without stultifying individuality and difference.

² 'Frankfurt School' is the name commonly used to refer to the Institute for Social Research, which was founded in 1923 and constituted the major centre for critical theory during the 1930s. In face of the dangerous political climate in antebellum Germany, the School moved first to Geneva and then to New York. Fromm was made the tenured director of the School's Social Psychology Section in 1930 and left in 1939 (see further McLaughlin, 1999).

³ Fromm uses the male pronoun to refer to either males or females. This, according to some of his critics, does not acquit Fromm of the charge of Freudian androcentric bias (on which, see, amongst others, Ingleby, 2006: *xlvi-xlviii*; Brookfield, 2005: 150-151), quite the contrary. Whilst such a discussion stretches beyond the scope of this essay, it is worth noting that, for Fromm, the archetypal act of emancipatory disobedience, indeed, the act which forced human on the road to history, is one committed by a woman: Eve (Fromm, 1955/1992: 161). Outside quotations, I have chosen to use the male and female pronouns interchangeably throughout the essay.

Some preliminary notes on Fromm's concept of man

Fromm believes that just as man is shaped by the form of social and economic organisation in which he lives and works, man also affects and often even consolidates that organisation in turn. The medium in which such dialectics take place, or else, the 'transmission belt between the economic structure of society and the prevailing ideas', is what Fromm terms the 'social character'. The social character is '*the essential nucleus of the character structure of most members of a group which has developed as the result of the basic experiences and mode of life common to that group*' (Fromm, 1941/1994: 276; original emphasis). As such, the content of the social character always pertains to the range of needs deeply rooted in the nature of man. For ideas to become powerful ideological forces, then, they have to respond directly to specific human needs prominent in a given social character; if not, they remain at best a stock of conscious convictions. Ultimately, the function of the social character is to maintain and enhance civil order by '[shaping] the energies of the members of society in such a way that their behaviour is not a matter of conscious decision as to whether or not to follow the social pattern, but one of *wanting to act as they have to act* and at the same time finding gratification in acting according to the requirements of the culture' (Fromm, 1955/2006: 77; original emphasis).

In elaborating on the issue of needs, Fromm poses a socio-biological question: 'What kind of ties to the world, persons, and things, must –and can– man develop in order to survive, given his specific equipment and the nature of the world around him?' The answer is twofold. First, man 'has to provide for his material needs (food, shelter, etc.) and for the survival of the group in terms of procreation and protection of the young'. This Fromm terms 'the process of assimilation'. But again, man 'could not remain sane even if he took care of all his material needs, unless he were able to establish some form of relatedness to others that allows him to feel "at home" and saves him from the experience of complete affective isolation and separateness' (Fromm & Maccoby, 1970: 14). Elsewhere Fromm also refers to happiness, rootedness, and transcendence as indispensable to successful human life (see, e.g., Fromm, 1962/2006: 64). These man achieves in the 'process of socialisation' (Fromm & Maccoby, 1970: 14).⁴

The primordial need to have one's own needs satisfied derives from *narcissism*, an overarching state common to all humans, albeit variable in its particular objects or, indeed, morality. From the standpoint of self-preservation, 'one's own life is more important than that of another' (Fromm, 1993/2007: 87), whereas, from the standpoint of self-experience, '[one's] sense of identity exists in terms of ... being identified with [a] group. He as a separate individual must be able to feel "I"' (ibid.: 85). Which of the two narcissistic needs will acquire primacy in the sense of greater urgency, and under which affective guises; who or what poses threats to corporeal survival and/or the identity; what comprises identity and which group appears preferable to the individual; the degree to which objective judgement is distorted and whether narcissism takes on a creative and benign or a destructive and malignant form—these are all matters dependent upon the social character predominant at a given historical moment.

⁴ Here Fromm draws inspiration from Marx's distinction between the 'constant drives' and the 'relative drives' or 'desires'. Indeed, in his later work, Fromm proceeds to admit that, whilst not developed in a systematic fashion, Marx's contribution to psychology deserves greater recognition (see, e.g., Fromm, 1961/2003, 1970).

It is through this open-ended lens that Fromm proceeds to dismiss the ‘naïve optimism of the eighteenth century’, as this is reflected in Marx’s ‘romantic idealisation of the working class’. ‘The famous statement at the end of the Communist manifesto that the workers “have nothing to lose but their chains”, contains a profound psychological error’, Fromm explains. ‘With their chains they have also to lose all those irrational needs and satisfactions which were originated whilst they were wearing the chains’ (Fromm, 1955/2006: 256-257). The aim here is to draw attention to the prior macro-social awakening of those irrational forces in man which, on the one hand, make him afraid of freedom, and, on the other hand, produce his lust for power and destructiveness, albeit by subjugation under higher external powers, be it the state of a leader, natural law, the past, or God. This development Fromm describes under the rubric of ‘authoritarian character’, the person who ‘admires authority and tends to submit to it, but at the same time ... wants to be an authority himself and have others submit to him’ (Fromm, 1941/1994: 162).

It follows that, if the theoretical vision of a better society is ever to be effectuated, if the biblical urge to ‘love thy neighbour as thyself’ is ever to find its concrete expression in universal reality, then political and economic reforms should be accompanied by a new *moral* orientation. The former cannot but be utterly futile in the absence of the latter. And this moral orientation, according to Fromm, is none other than an unyielding commitment to humanism. Conceived *in abstracto*, his ideal man is the ‘revolutionary character’, the committed humanist who ‘is capable of saying “No”. Or, to put it differently, the revolutionary character is a person capable of disobedience. He is someone for whom disobedience can be a virtue’ (Fromm, 1955/1992: 161).

In what follows, I explicate Fromm’s conceptualisation of narcissism, of the authoritarian and revolutionary characters, and of the ways in which they may all relate to one another.

The paradox of narcissism

In conceptualising narcissism, Fromm takes the lead from Freud and the distinction between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary narcissism’ in particular. Primary narcissism, on the one hand, is that condition whereby the libido of the newborn infant is wholly directed to the self, and does not extend to objects in the outside world (Freud, 1914/1986). Every infant, in other words, is born into a state of narcissism, in the belief that the whole world revolves around it, indeed, that the world *is* it. All people, it follows, are bound to harbour in a secret corner of their psyche some narcissistic delusions of grandeur, delusions which may be reduced to the socially accepted minimum, yet never fully disappear. Narcissistic delusions may nurse exaggeratedly favourable evaluations of the self (or parts of it, for that matter), coupled with extreme anxieties of being found weak and worthless. Such states Freud describes in pathological terms, as manifestations of ‘secondary narcissism’.

Although a devoted advocate of the Freudian ‘*dynamic*’ concept of human behaviour; that is, the assumption that highly charged forces motivate behaviour, and that behaviour can be understood and predicted only by understanding these forces’ (Fromm, 1964: 65, original emphasis), Fromm ultimately finds that ‘Freud’s concept of narcissism [is] quite restricted, for it [relies far too heavily] on libido theory and because it [is] applied mainly to the problems of the mentally sick’ (Fromm, 1993/2007: 87). Fromm’s self-imposed task is, instead, to deconstruct *and* reconstruct the narcissism of ‘normal’

individuals, especially the dynamic *social* processes by which the narcissistic character becomes typical of many ‘normal’ people in their symbiotic relatedness.

Before continuing, it is necessary to point out the basic constitutive elements of the intense narcissism experienced by normal individuals, especially in light of the arguments which will follow. Narcissists, according to Fromm, have the tendency to transform into psychic facts not just positive forms of self-regard (e.g., intelligence, physical prowess), but also ‘qualities about which normally a person would not be proud, such as [the] capacity to be afraid and thus to foretell danger’ (Fromm, 1964: 71). In response to perceived ego threats, narcissists end up turning others into what is often referred to in psychoanalytical jargon as idealised or archaic ‘self-objects’. Narcissists, that is, deny others their unique individuality, fuse them into their own extended self-conception, and employ them as mere mirrors of their own exhibitionistic being—mirrors that serve but constantly to protect, maintain, or enhance the narcissists’ self-esteem (see further Kohut, 1986). The most dangerous result of intense narcissistic attachment is the distortion of rational judgment. It is not simply that the object of narcissism is thought to be valuable because ‘it is me or mine’, nor just that the ‘extraneous (“not me”) world is inferior, dangerous, immoral’; that the person is convinced that there is no bias in the judgment ‘leads to a severe distortion of his capacity to think and to judge, since this capacity is blunted again and again when he deals with himself and what is his’ (Fromm, 1964: 73-74).

Of self-defensive necessity, narcissists treat any type of criticism as unfair, hostile, and worthy of furious reaction. Here we find what is sometimes paraded as a psychological truism: that narcissists are not incapable of loving others, yet they are incapable of loving another as another person. But is not this the very proof that ‘[t]he narcissist cannot love’ himself, either? That ‘at most he desires himself’? That ‘he is egotistic, “selfish”, “full of himself”’ (Fromm, 1993/2007: 87)? Indeed, Fromm takes the argument to the end. As a result of unproductiveness, he argues, ‘[t]he selfish person does not love himself too much, but too little; in fact, he hates himself’. Much as he may appear to care for himself, he tries in vain to ‘cover up and compensate for his failure to care for his real self’ (Fromm, 1949/1986: 131). This is by no means to say that narcissism should be equated with selfishness or egotism. To be sure, there is some resemblance between the concepts in that they both imply an inability to love oneself and others, as well as a desire to satisfy exclusively the ever-greedy self. But, says Fromm, whilst the narcissist ‘cannot know himself, for he is in his own way, because he is so full of himself that neither he himself, nor the world, nor God can become the object of his knowing’ (ibid.), the selfish or egotistical person does not necessarily overevaluate his own subjective processes, nor does he always lack awareness of the world outside (Fromm, 1964).

To complicate things further, personal narcissism is often transformed into group or social narcissism. The functions, biological as well as sociological, of the transformation are discussed further below. At any rate, group narcissism is not as recognisable as its individual counterpart, not to group insiders at least. For ‘*within* the favoured group, ... everybody’s personal narcissism is flattered and the fact that millions of people agree with the statements makes them appear as reasonable’ (Fromm, 1964: 79; original emphasis). Fromm clarifies that the pathological qualities of narcissism are not reduced as such. That which appears as reasonable, he tells us, ‘is that about which there

is agreement, if not amongst all, at least amongst a substantial number of people; “reasonable”, for most people, has nothing to do with reason, but with consensus’ (ibid.).

Ironically, not only is there still a theoretical possibility of wedding so intense a solipsistic state of narcissism with love for neighbours and strangers, but the possibility in question even appears to be exemplifying the biblical ‘difference-blind’ concept of equality in an ideal-typical manner. Implied is, alas, Søren Kierkegaard’s claim that only death can truly erase all distinctions between the self and others—that the ideal (and, perhaps, the one and only) neighbour cannot but be the dead neighbour (Kierkegaard, 1994). What are we, then, to make of the fact that deadly confrontations most usually occur between neighbouring communities or groups (Blok, 2001)? Should we surmise a macabre expression of political correctness, a perversely literal application of Kierkegaard’s philosophical insight? I think not.

Bloody wars have often been fought between neighbours and former allies under such banners as equality and justice, yet, from a psychoanalytic perspective, banners do not always signify the primordial motivating force behind the decision to join the ranks or the act of killing on the battlefield. We might argue, instead, with Freud, that the loss of cultural differences in close circles, and of the attendant power differentials—in short, ‘the narcissism of minor differences’—, represents itself a threat as grave as to trigger irreparably explosive situations. Not the grand ‘metanarrative’ schema of Kierkegaardian equality, but its secular alternative that is the psychic lure of inequality is what drives the narcissist to kill his neighbour. ‘It is always possible to bind quite large numbers of people together in love, provided that others are left out as targets for aggression’ (Freud, 1930/2002: 50; see also Blok, 2001).

Generally speaking, malignant group narcissism finds symbolic satisfaction in the commonly shared ideology of superiority of one’s group, and of the inferiority of all others. “‘We’ are admirable; “they” are despicable. “We” are good; “they” are evil’ (Fromm, 1964: 82). Notwithstanding that words themselves *are* deeds in that they bear the traces of the sociospatial dichotomies they help moralise and perpetuate (see, e.g., Bourdieu, 1991), the satisfaction of the narcissistic images of a group also pleads for some degree of confirmation in concrete reality. The validity of stereotypes only appears retroactively, ‘when those upon [and, in this case, also those from] whom they have been wished seem to acquiesce in them’ (Herzfeld, 1992: 131). Let us give the floor to Fromm again.

‘As long as the whites in Alabama or in South Africa [had] the power to demonstrate their superiority over the Negroes through social, economic, and political acts of discrimination, their narcissistic beliefs [had] some element of reality, and thus [bolstered] up the entire narcissistic thought-system. The same held true for the Nazis; there the physical destruction of all Jews had to serve as the proof of the superiority of the Aryans (for a sadist the fact that he can kill a man proves that the killer is superior). If, however, the narcissistically inflated group does not have available a minority which is sufficiently helpless to lend itself as an object for narcissistic satisfaction, the group’s narcissism will easily lead to the wish for military conquests; this was the path of pan-Germanism and pan-Slavism before 1914. In both cases the respective nations were endowed with the role of being the “chosen nation”, superior to all others, and hence justified in attacking those who did not accept their superiority’ (Fromm, 1964: 86).

Indeed, at least on the impalpable level of talionic emotions, the justification for waging ever-new wars is what we may now describe as a widespread sense of wounded narcissism. That the narcissistic person reacts with intense fury to criticism, and that ‘only the destruction of the critic –or oneself– can save one from the threat to one’s narcissistic security’ (ibid.: 75), also applies to the narcissistic group. Disparagement of the symbols of group narcissism, from the flag and a territory to one’s own God, emperor, or leader, to what Douglas (1970/2007) names ‘natural symbols’ (e.g., race, blood, and kinship), has often led to mass feelings of vengeance, which, in its turn, instigated further conflicts. ‘The wounded narcissism can be healed only if the offender is crushed and thus the insult to one’s narcissism is undone. Revenge, individual and national, is often based on wounded narcissism and on the need to “cure” the wound by the annihilation of the offender’ (Fromm, 1964: 86-87).

For fear that moral guagmires may slip into the equation and offend the ever-fragile ego of the group, a rabbit-in-the-hat-trick is performed. On the one hand, the real, grave consequences of vengeful attitudes remain in obscurity for good. On the other hand, vengeful attitudes are clothed in the disguise of moral paternalism, in pharisaic gestures of openheartedness and democratic republicanism that allow for satisfying mass illusions of infallible nobility as well. The murderous war in Iraq, now construed apocalyptically as a patriotic crusade against the evil scourge of terrorism, now packaged as a humanitarian intervention by the enlightened West, and the sea of so-dubbed therapeutic programmes for the millions of incapacitated prisoners on both shores of the Atlantic, constitute just two of numerous ready cases in point where universalistic standards are applied in a one-eyed fashion, where ‘[a]ny criticism of one’s own doctrine is a vicious and unbearable attack; criticism of the others’ position is a well-meant attempt to help them to return to [or get to know] the truth’ (ibid.: 82; see also Cheliotis, 2009).

That the lowest of the low may refuse to turn the other cheek often only serves to reinforce the very stereotypes it is meant to renounce (see, e.g., Scott, 1990; Wacquant, 2009). Overt struggles waged by the oppressed materially and ideologically against their oppressor may increase the loyalty even of those not wholly identified with the narcissistic group, as in the case of defamatory propaganda against ‘the Germans’ as a whole and the ‘Hun’ symbol of the First World War (Fromm, 1941/1994). To invert the point, but to make the same observation, it may be in the narcissistic interests of the target to exhibit what Derrida terms ‘autoimmunitary perversion’, that is, ‘to immunise itself against its “own” immunity’, and to ‘expose its vulnerability, to give the greatest possible coverage to the aggression against which it wishes to protect itself’ (Derrida, in Borradori, 2003: 94, 108-109). To seal the deal, as the list of atrocities committed grows in response, so does the need to apply them ever more resolutely to prevent the victims from making their voices not just heard but also listened to as such (Bauman, 2003: 86).

Even if awareness ever allowed for any degree of guilt over one’s own role in the creation of the problem in the first instance (call it terrorism, street crime, prostitution, or what have you), or in the disproportionately harmful and, at any rate, inhumane treatment of ‘wrongdoers’, that guilt now quickly boils over, as if it has always been directed against false foes. The repression of guilt and the consequent consent to the continuation and increase of exclusionary behaviours are to be explained by reference not just to the high ‘exit costs’ (e.g., potential material losses and the alleged riskiness of more

philanthropic alternatives), or to the sequential nature of the behaviour in place, whereby the decision to dissent equals to confessing to one's own errors up to that point (see further Milgram, 1974/2004). No doubt these are losses a narcissistic group feels too uncomfortable to stomach. But, when an ideology or what social psychologists term 'cover story' is present to justify a goal and the use of otherwise unacceptable means to bring that goal to completion, there is no need to assess alternatives, nor any past errors to be recognised, only guilty enemies to be corrected, if not exterminated.

Throughout history, for instance, religious discourse has often served to support the power of cosmic rulers by preaching that obedience is a virtue and disobedience a vice. Christian teaching, writes Fromm, 'has interpreted Adam's disobedience as a deed which corrupted him and his seed so fundamentally that only the special acts of God's grace could save man from this corruption'. As a consequence, secular authority was resisted only by those 'who took seriously the biblical teachings of humility, brotherliness, and justice', only to risk being labelled and punished themselves as rebels and sinners against God. In a similar vein, the Protestantism of Luther claimed that 'nothing can be more poisonous, hurtful or devilish than a rebel' (Fromm, 1981: 46).

Still, one might wonder, do we really need to stretch the analysis so much? Is it not the case that, prior to its apparent emotive functions, narcissistic pathos assumes a vital biological role? If the individual did not attribute to himself an importance far greater than what he holds in storage for anybody else, 'from where would he take the energy and interest to defend himself against others, to work for his subsistence, to fight for his survival, to press his claims against those of others?' (Fromm, 1964: 72) The aim of what Fromm terms 'reactive violence', for instance, is preventative, and more often than not consists in biological 'preservation, not destruction. It is not entirely the outcome of irrational passions, but to some extent of rational calculation; hence it also implies a certain proportionality between ends and means' (ibid.: 25). True as all this may be, antagonism to whatever lies outside the realm of the self also stands, paradoxically, in stark opposition to the very principle of survival. '[F]or the individual can survive only if he organises himself in groups; hardly anyone would be able to protect himself all alone against the dangers of nature, nor would he be able to do many kinds of work which can only be done in groups' (ibid.: 73). Survival, in this case, is inseparably tied to the vigour of the favoured group, be it the clan, an organisation, the nation, a religion, or even the state itself. So much so –and here is a further paradox– that 'its members consider its importance as great or greater than that of their own lives, and, furthermore, that they believe in the righteousness, or even superiority, of their group as compared with others' (ibid.: 78).

To those who may object that the paradoxical nature of narcissism now appears even more complex, I would readily respond that they are absolutely right. In and of itself, the transmutation of reality into illusions that fit and boost the self-idolatry of the group and of the people that comprise it, cannot always safeguard against the corporeal, biological threats of narcissism. Nor, surely, can it guarantee complete emotive satisfaction of a sort. It is merely cold comfort, if any, to the thousands of American and British troops facing death on the battlefields of Iraq (and to their families and friends) that supernumerary locals are under the same threat. For the experience of loss and death, whether in its own right, or, even more so, when caused by allegedly inferior enemies in the heat of warfare, is what man fears the most. It is the quintessential expression of

irreversible impoverishment, the shameful sense of absolute weakness, vulnerability, helplessness, and impotence. It is the epitome of universal equality before the laws of nature. This being the case, how are we to account for the continuing proliferation of surpassingly costly wars under such narcissistic banners as national and individual security, territorial sovereignty, and humanism? Which are the forces that impel people willingly, and actively, to consent in their masses to their own subordination, sacrifice even? What hegemony has this power? Or, to phrase the question differently, under what conditions can corporeal and emotional loss be of narcissistic value?

To answer these questions would require that we turn back to historicity, that is, enrich our perspective of subordinates and their very own psychic motives to obey displeasing commands with an intricate account of the ways in, and the broader cultural climate within, which such commands are communicated effectively by superiors. Space does not allow such an account here, only to mention that, for Fromm, particularly susceptible to authoritarianism are the lower middle classes. Classes, that is, with little, if any, foreseeable hope of upward socioeconomic mobility (Fromm, 1964)—or of socioeconomic stability and security, we may add. The ‘psychological scarcity’ so created, whether in physiological or ontological terms, compel man to hate, to envy, or to submit (Fromm, 1949/1986). The authoritarian character, then, is not to be confused with the rational actor of neoclassical economic theory. Whilst in rational activity ‘the *result* corresponds to the *motivation* of an activity—one acts in order to attain a certain result’, the strivings of the authoritarian character stem from ‘a compulsion which has essentially a negative character: to escape an unbearable situation’, and is so strong that the person is ‘unable to choose a line of action that could be a solution in any other but a fictitious sense’ (Fromm, 1941/1994: 153; original emphasis). No wonder states lacking either the means or the will to provide adequately for the majority of the populace, or for large segments of it, often tend to pre-empt the spread of dissatisfaction and necessitate infantile attachment to their rule by cultivating a malignant type of narcissistic pride on a mass scale. Targeting weak or comparatively weaker out-groups serves to reaffirm power relations based on fear of force and to divert negative attention away from leaders and their role in generating or not resolving insecurities on the socioeconomic front, at the same time as providing the public with a concrete outlet onto which to transfer their anxieties, angers, and complexes (Fromm, 1964; see further Cheliotis, 2009).

Apparently, it does not take much more than a gifted demagogic orator (or, at the very least, an extraordinarily arrogant man of action in a position of great power) and a millenarian rhetoric that, whilst promulgating the urgent need for reactionary or revengeful violence, subtly serves to plant the seeds of ‘compensatory’ destructiveness as well. This, explains Fromm, is the violence ‘of those to whom life has denied the capacity for any positive expression of their specifically human powers. They need to destroy precisely because they are human, since being human means transcending thing-ness’ (Fromm, 1964: 31). The sadistic pleasure one finds in exerting complete mastery over another animate creature, often comes along with compensatory violence, whether this be committed individually or via identifying oneself with a powerful person or group. ‘By this symbolic participation in another person’s life [—what Fromm, building on Freud’s work, calls “transference” (see Fromm, 1962/2006: 40-41)—], man has the illusion of acting, when in reality he only submits to, and becomes a part of, those who act’ (Fromm,

1964: 31). Sadism, in other words, is the flipside of masochism in the authoritarian character.⁵

The unavoidable question is whether we can break the cycle of malignant narcissism. For one, Fromm argues, narcissistic cathexes are not innately destructive. It is therefore possible to divert them away from war and class struggle, away even from a shaky Hobbesian truce, and into a common normative commitment to human solidarity.

Life is elsewhere—but where?⁶

Not dissimilarly to the concept of the authoritarian character, the concept of the ‘revolutionary character’ is both political and psychological. That is to say, it, too, combines a political category, humanism, with a psychological one, the character structure, the latter constituting the basis for the former. Implicit here, as earlier, is the distinction between behaviour and character in the Freudian, dynamic sense. That a person utters revolutionary phrases and partakes in a revolution, that he *acts* as a revolutionary, does not alone suffice to prove the revolutionary character of the person in question. For character to be classified as revolutionary, behaviour must emanate from particular, indeed, higher motives.

As such, Fromm expounds, the revolutionary character should not be mistaken for the “‘rebel without cause’, who disobeys because he has no commitment to life except the one to say “no”” (Fromm, 1981: 46). Not that pursuing any given cause suffices to turn the ‘rebel’ into the revolutionary character. The rebel only resents authority for not being appreciated and accepted in its circles. He wants to overthrow authority for no other reason but to acquire and exercise power himself. When the aim is finally attained, he may well befriend the very authority he was bitterly fighting just before. To Fromm, ‘twentieth-century political life is a cemetery containing the moral graves of people who started out as alleged revolutionaries and who turned out to be nothing but opportunistic rebels’ (Fromm, 1955/1992: 151). Such is also the case in our times. To take just one example, whilst allegedly seeking to effectuate grassroots reforms and combat corruption in states and societies throughout the world, neoliberal elites tend to thirst for archaic, absolutist power and guard it closely by privileging those who fit in (see, e.g., Xenakis, 2009, this volume).

The revolutionary character is not a fanatic, either. Clinically speaking, the fanatic is an exceedingly narcissistic person, completely unrelated to the world outside. To shield himself against manifest psychosis, the fanatic has chosen and idolised a cause, political, religious or whatnot. ‘[B]y complete submission to his idol, he receives a passionate sense of life, a meaning of life; for in his submission he identifies himself with the idol, which he has inflated and made into an absolute’. Extremely cold and passionate at one and the same time, the fanatic resembles ‘burning ice’, he is close to what the prophets called an ‘idol worshiper’ (Fromm, 1955/1992: 152). Even those rare instances in which the fanatic actively disobeys irrational authority, are to be understood as expressions of submissiveness: whether as provocative acts ‘intended to force the irrational authority to

⁵ Notwithstanding some obvious similarities, Fromm’s concept of the authoritarian character should not be mistaken for its infamous cousin that is the ‘authoritarian personality’, put forward ten years later by Adorno and a research team he led at the Frankfurt School (see Adorno *et al.*, 1950; also Cheliotis, 2009).

⁶ The first part of the title I have borrowed from Milan Kundera’s homonymous novel. Kundera himself borrowed the title from Rimbaud, Breton, and the decked walls of the Sorbonne in May 1968.

uphold and strengthen its control', or as attempts at a 'turning away from one irrational authority in order to submit to another, more powerful one' (Funk, 1982: 94). Similar arguments may be raised with respect to the person prone to adopt majoritarian attitudes in the name of majoritarianism alone (Fromm, 1955/1992: 159), or, conversely, to engage in the status-seeking, 'fashionable' type of minoritarian resistance. All in all, the rebel and the fanatic represent the dominating and submissive facets of the authoritarian character, respectively.

But if the revolutionary character is not all this, then what is she? Or, to put the question otherwise, which are the prerequisites of revolutionary action? To start with, the revolutionary character is fearless of power. The demanding nature of the struggle for what Bauman, echoing Fromm, terms 'human survival', cannot prod her to forsake natural survival altogether, that is, 'to *reject* a life that is not up to our love's standards and therefore unworthy of living' (Bauman, 2003: 80; original emphasis). In breaking with resignation, but also with passivity and weightless, bourgeois reformism, the revolutionary character has the courage to 'err' and to 'sin', to be alone, to suffer the consequences of disobedience. Unsuccumbed to the prospect of falling in the course, she fights to the end (Fromm, 1981). Apparently, the concern here differs from James Scott's (1990) 'hidden transcripts of resistance', the various day-to-day techniques by which subordinates manage to insinuate their resistance, in disguised forms, into the public domain (see also Cheliotis, 2006), hence courage remains crucial to Fromm's account.

Albeit a necessary ingredient of disobedience, however, courage is hardly enough. The very need for courageous conduct presupposes sufficient knowledge of the social functions of power, whilst the actualisation of courage requires satisfactory apprehension of where power lies, the variable forms it takes (visible or invisible), the mechanisms it employs (e.g., sanctions and rewards) and a realistic appraisal of the effectiveness thereof. The revolutionary character is not a 'dreamer'; that she holds a deep and genuine conviction does not blind her to the fact that 'power can kill you, compel you, and even pervert you' (Fromm, 1955/1992: 160). All things considered, the most fundamental trait of the revolutionary character is that she is *free, independent, and authentic*, in the sense of being able to think, feel, and decide for herself. Although not a cynic, the revolutionary character thinks and feels in a 'critical mood'. In her life, the practice of reflexivity amounts to an unrelenting occurrence—a banality, as it were. She is always alert to the possibility that fictions are made a hegemonic substitute for reality in the form of tradition, superstition, clichés, or so-styled 'common sense', and that, in any case, deviation from the norms entails given perils (Fromm, 1955/1992). In this latter respect, the revolutionary character is aware that, just as the strength of power and the ineluctability of submission are liable to overestimation, due, e.g., to such overt exhibitions of pure force as staged military reviews, highly publicised nuclear weapons tests, and the brutal suppression of dissidence (Wrong, 1979/1988), so they may be inordinately undermined by foolhardy comrades and manipulative political opportunists.

It is not only courage that depends upon freedom of reason. The reverse is equally true. To evade the bonds of power, man needs to be willing to deal with the narcissistic dangers and burdens inherent to freedom of reason. Neutralisation techniques do not behave. For example, one needs to accept any hitherto sublimated guilt for submission and even evildoing, the disconcerting prospect that enemies may be discovered amongst friends and allies, the endless nature of the newly started struggle, the label of cowardice

for giving up, and the sheer chance of eventual failure and frustration (see, e.g., Fromm, 1981). The process of trying to resist power resembles the mythical encounter between Hercules and the beast Hydra: when one head is cut off, multiple grow in its place. We might say that the revolutionary character merges two variants of courage, the capacity to overcome fear of almighty power in practical terms with the ability to over-rule the psychological fear of positive freedom construed as the accomplishment of uniqueness and individuality. In a continuously dialectical fashion, the former requires the latter inasmuch as it helps sustain it. This is why, in the final analysis, the revolutionary character may only superficially direct disobedience against irrational authorities as such. 'Disobedience is not primarily an attitude directed *against* something, but *for* something: for man's capacity to see, to say what he sees, and to refuse to say what he does not see' (ibid.: 48; original emphasis).

Whilst often struggling on her own, and whilst freedom, independence, and authenticity are the realisation of individuality, as opposed simply to emancipation from external coercion, the revolutionary character does not live in isolation. '[T]he growth of personality occurs in the process of being related to, and interested in, others and the world' (Fromm, 1955/1992: 157). The revolutionary character is not identified merely with the culture in which she happens to be born and raised, 'which is nothing but an accident of time and geography' (ibid.: 158). Thanks to her capacity to judge the accidental on the criteria of 'that which is not accidental (reason), in the norms which exist in and for the human race' (ibid.), she is identified with humanity as a whole. This relatedness is entirely different from 'dependence', 'heteronomous obedience', or '*ipso facto* submission' to an alternative 'irrational authority' (Fromm, 1981: 19, 20). 'The question is not really one of disobedience or obedience, but one of disobedience or obedience to what and to whom' (Fromm, 1955/1992: 162). Obedience, if the term is to be used at all here, becomes 'autonomous', an act of affirmation rather than submission (Fromm, 1981: 19, 20). Fromm also imputes positive value to the replacement of irrational authority with its rational equivalent, whereby 'the authority, whether it is held by a teacher or a captain of a ship giving orders in an emergency, acts in the name of reason which, being universal, I can accept without submitting' (ibid.: 21). Eventually, however, Fromm divorces rational thinking, self-liberation, and revolutionary action from all claims deriving from an authority other than the endogenous authority of the self itself (see further Funk, 1982: 95-101).

A profusion of questions now need to be addressed. Is it not utopian to long for the day when humans will think and behave rationally, if their very nature is laden with narcissistic irrationality? Realistically speaking, how much rationality, if any, can they exercise? And is it at all possible to combine, by way of rationality, *de facto* desires with higher goods? Why would the exhorting and only promissory vision of all-inclusive equality under humanism prove more appealing than the comfortable orthodoxies of actualised distinctiveness? Lastly, is not to prescribe any higher good, humanism not excluded, an authoritarian act in its own right? Is not Fromm the humanist putting himself forward as a 'rational authority', a Platonic guardian of sorts?

On the abstract level of historical progression, Fromm argues for what he terms 'benign narcissism'. In the benign form, the object of narcissistic attachment is focused on achievement, or, more precisely, on the effort so made by private individuals or groups. The finite end of *having*, in other words, matters less than the infinite struggle for

being (Fromm, 1976/2007). Such ‘being mode’ is not to be confused with the lifework of Hannah Arendt’s *animal laborens*, the armies of Eichmanns and Oppenheimers who view their work uncritically, as a mere end in itself. Nor is the ‘being mode’ akin to the lifework of the Arendtian alternative, the *homo faber* who judges material labour and practice only once the process is complete (see further Arendt, 1958/1998). As Richard Sennett would argue, the ‘being mode’ is to be found at the meeting point between *animal laborens* and *homo faber*, there where ‘thinking and feeling are contained within the process of making’ (Sennett, 2008: 7).

As concerns private individuals, the mode of being requires that ‘the biologically necessary degree of narcissism [be] reduced to the degree of narcissism that is compatible with social co-operation’ (Fromm, 1964: 73). There is nothing wrong with nurturing narcissistic pride, say in one’s work as a carpenter or as a scientist, as long as the object of attachment entails personal industry and connection to external reality. Exclusive interest in one’s own work and achievements is constantly balanced by one’s interest in the process and material of work itself. ‘One who has learned to achieve cannot help acknowledging that others have achieved similar things in similar ways—even if his narcissism may persuade him that his own achievement is greater than that of others’ (ibid.: 77). The dynamics of benign narcissism are, therefore, self-checking. An analogous case may be argued with regard to social or group narcissism. Here, too, one may hope, or, at the very least, hypothesise, that the collectivity may help individuals maintain a narcissistic equilibrium and direct their passion towards the actualisation of progressive ideals and aims. For instance, ‘[i]f the object of group narcissism is an achievement, ... [t]he very need to achieve something creative makes it necessary to leave the closed circle of group solipsism and to be interested in the object it wants to achieve’ (ibid.: 78).

Mindful of the Freudian maxim that attempting to impose quantitative controls upon the ‘narcissistic core’ is utterly futile, Fromm soon takes two crucial detours. For one, he decides to posit benign narcissism as subject solely to a prior qualitative change in the object of attachment. ‘Even without reducing narcissistic energy in each person, the *object* could be changed’, he writes (ibid.: 90; original emphasis). For such qualitative change remains contingent upon the existence of progressive authority structures, however, Fromm no longer situates the object of benign narcissism within the narrow ethical spheres of private individuals, the family, particular cohorts of the general population, or localist political systems, nor within the glamour of their respective achievements. Man, Fromm now suggests, needs to free himself from ‘the ties of blood and soil, from his mother and his father, from special loyalties to state, class, race, party, or religion’ (Fromm, 1955/1992: 165). For, ‘[i]f the individual could experience himself primarily as a citizen of the world, and if he could feel pride in mankind and in its achievements, his narcissism would turn towards the human race as an object, rather than to its conflicting components’ (Fromm, 1964: 90). What is more, pride in the achievements of mankind would not exhaust itself to nostalgic retrospection; ‘[c]ommon tasks for all mankind are at hand: the joint fight against disease, against hunger, for the dissemination of knowledge and art through our means of communication amongst all peoples of the world’ (ibid.: 91).

Albeit (or, perhaps, because) himself a declared atheist since the age of twenty-six, Fromm wishes for a theanthropic form of religious awakening from ‘narcissistic

madness'. Despite a few linguistic lapses verging on the self-contradictory as much as on the absolutism of ideal-typical oneirism, he is deeply aware that, in reality, '[o]ne can only examine what the *optimal* [as opposed to maximal] possibilities are to avoid the catastrophe' (ibid.: 90; emphasis added).

'The Old Testament says: "Love thy neighbour as thyself". Here the demand is to overcome one's narcissism at least to the point where one's neighbour becomes as important as oneself. But the Old Testament goes much further than this in demanding love for the "stranger". (You know the soul of the stranger, for strangers have you been in the land of Egypt). The stranger is precisely the person who is not part of my clan, my family, my nation; he is not part of the group to which I am narcissistically attached. He is nothing other than human. One discovers the human being in the stranger, as Hermann Cohen has pointed out. In the love for the stranger narcissistic love has vanished. For it means loving another human being in his suchness and his difference from me, and not because he is like me. When the New Testament says "love thine enemy", it expresses the same idea in a more pointed form. If the stranger has become fully human to you, there is also no longer an enemy, because *you* have become truly human. To love the stranger and the enemy is possible only if narcissism has been overcome, if "I am thou"' (ibid.: 89; original emphasis).

The crucial point here is that, if equality is a necessary prerequisite of solidarity, equality itself requires difference, not uniformity. Unless, then, one remains stubbornly attached to a relativism that leaves one vulnerable to abuses of power, Fromm's version of humanism may be said to offer criteria that are broad enough to guide our assessment of social developments without being pre-formative. In all, Fromm manages to navigate between the Scylla of 'moralism as egoistic universalism', whereby the formal recognition of humanity to all is not accompanied by reminders of the repressed economic and social conditions of access to the universal or by some form of political action aimed at universalising these conditions in practice (Bourdieu, 2000/2008: 65), and the Charybdis of authoritarianism in the sense of philosophical monism (Pietikainen, 2004).

Some additional comments by way of clarification and qualification need to be made on the concept of difference. Just as killing one's neighbour in the Kierkegaardian essentialist sense is more often than not the veil of totalitarian designs (e.g., ethnic cleansing), so too is the sustenance of difference in the mere form of the Aristotelian *zēn*, nowadays referred to rather fashionably as multiculturalist tolerance. Jacques Derrida puts the point thus:

'[T]olerance is first of all a form of charity. ... Tolerance is always on the side of the "reason of the strongest", where "might is right"; it is a supplementary mark of sovereignty, the good face of sovereignty, which says to the other from its elevated position, I am letting you be, you are not insufferable, I am leaving you a place in my home, but do not forget that his is my home... ... In France, the phrase "threshold of tolerance" was used to describe the limit beyond which it is no longer decent to ask a national community to welcome any more foreigners, immigrant workers, and the like. François Mitterrand once used this unfortunate expression as a self-justifying word of caution: beyond a certain number of foreigners or immigrants who do not share our nationality, our language, our culture, and our customs, a quasi-organic and unpreventable –in short, a natural– phenomenon of rejection can be expected' (Derrida, quoted in Borradori, 2003: 127-128).

The Derridaean reverse of tolerance is pure hospitality, a notion reminiscent of Aristotle's *eu zēn* and closest to Fromm's idea of difference. 'Hospitality *itself* opens or is in advance open to someone who is neither expected nor invited, to whomever arrives as an absolutely foreign *visitor*, as a new *arrival*, nonidentifiable and unforeseeable, in short, wholly other. I would call this a hospitality of *visitation* rather than *invitation*' (ibid.: 128-129; original emphasis). Fromm, too, divorces difference from the conditionalities inherent to relations of superiority or inferiority. As a matter of fact, he views the accentuation of difference, that is, the cultivation of the positive sides of individual peculiarities, as the foundation of a richer and broader human culture (Wilde, 2004).

This analytical leap allows Fromm to level one final criticism against the Freudian conceptualisation of secondary narcissism, particularly against the 'almost mechanical alternative between ego-love and object-love'. According to Freud, 'the more love I turn towards the outside world, the less love is left for myself, and *vice versa*'. Fromm's philosophical counterargument is this: '[i]f it is a virtue to love my neighbour as a human being, it must be a virtue—and not a vice—to love myself, since I am a human being, too. There is no concept of man in which I am not included' (Fromm, 1956/2000: 54). What, on the level of practice, dispels the utilitarian dilemma of narcissistic love is that the human objects of our attitudes are, in and of themselves, unique and unduplicable.

Granted, no more than a handful of persons can become the object of our *manifest* love at any given time (or throughout life, for that matter). But this is not to be confused with what Derrida and Kierkegaard describe as the original sin of love, whereby 'I always betray the Other because *toute autre est un autre* [every other is absolutely other], because I have to make a *choice* to *select* who my neighbour is from the mass of the Thirds'. Nor should we conclude, as Žižek does, that '[j]ustice and love are structurally incompatible' and that 'the universal proposition "I love you all" acquires the level of actual existence only if "there is at least one whom I hate"' (Žižek, 2005: 182-183; original emphasis). Fromm's concept of love for man as such is hardly a matter of numbers. Or, if it is, then it can only concern the infinite, all that is alive, mankind as a whole. 'If I love my brother, I love all my brothers; if I love my child, I love all my children; no, beyond that, I love all children, all that are in need of my help' (Fromm, 1956/2000: 49). Even in erotic love for a single person of highly individual qualities, Fromm goes on to argue, others are excluded solely in the sense of erotic fusion, of full commitment in all aspects of life. What is commonly referred to as erotic love, in other words, transgresses the narrow confines of symbiotic attachment and qualifies as true love inasmuch as 'I love from the essence of my being—and experience the other person in the essence of his or her being. In essence, all human beings are identical. We are all part of One; we are One. This being so, it should not make any difference whom we love' (ibid.: 52).

Towards a conclusion?

Fromm believes that, just as human history began with an act of disobedience—Eve's decision to eat the fruit against the wish of God—, so too it may end with an act of blind obedience: 'the obedience of the men who push the button to the men who give the orders, and the obedience to ideas which make it possible to think in terms of such madness' (Fromm, 1955/1992: 162). Such being the case, disobedience is more than an

entitlement; it is a duty. Fromm is well aware that wishful theorising does not suffice to give rise to the cognitive, psychological, and moral bases of the socialist humanist world order he envisions. Whether or not malignant narcissism is ‘so deeply ingrained in man that he will never overcome his “narcissistic core”, as Freud thought’, whether or not there is ‘any hope that narcissistic madness will not lead to the destruction of man before he has had a chance to become fully human’; these are pragmatic questions in need of answers as heads-on and concrete as possible (Fromm, 1964: 90).

How, then, to effectuate the idea of a universal human? Lilie Chouliaraki (2006) explains *ex negativo* that the highly sensationalised discourse of a universal humanity falls short. By virtue of its exclusive reliance on sensationalism, such discourse does very little to raise, let alone answer, the questions of why and what to do to eradicate destructive phenomena. It rather reinforces narcissistic sensibilities and practices, either by presuming that we –perpetrators, bystanders, or unaware others– already possess a kind-heartedness in wait only for specific directions, or by framing victims as human only insofar as their stories reflect our own emotional world. Speaking *ex positivo*, the capacities of narcissists to become ‘public figures’ and connect to others depend on those technologies of the self that tap into their reflexivity in the sense of contemplation (Chouliaraki, 2006: 211). For television mediation to perform this pedagogical function, for instance, it must ‘[combine] the emphasis on emotion –which facilitates the spectators’ capacity to “connect”– with an element of impersonality, which interrupts rather than reproduces their narcissism’ (Chouliaraki, 2006: 212; see also Chouliaraki, this volume). Impersonality entails the use of deliberative genres of the media in ways that foreground the distinction between the spectacle and authentic reality, and between the act of watching and the appreciation of the need to undertake ethical action.

In various of his writings, Fromm takes up the challenge by offering a number of suggestions, some more utopian in their applicability and effectiveness than others. In *The Heart of Man*, Fromm argues that supranational organisations should establish symbols, holidays, and festivals that would help change the object of narcissism to the image of human race and its achievements. ‘Not the national holiday, but the “day of man” would become the highest holiday of the year’ (Fromm, 1964: 91). Concurrently, the focus of our educational effort should be to cultivate ‘critical thought, objectivity, acceptance of reality, and a concept of truth which is subject to no fiat and is valid for every conceivable group’ (ibid.: 92). The teaching of philosophy and anthropology, for example, would ‘enable man to experience in himself all of humanity; ... the fact that he is a sinner and a saint, a child and an adult, a sane and an insane person, a man of the past and one of the future—that he carries within himself that which mankind has been and that which it will be’ (ibid.: 93). History and geography textbooks, too, should be rewritten in ways that counter the distorted glorification of national accounts.

For these to happen, however, all nations must first reduce their own political and economic sovereignty in favour of the sovereignty of mankind. ‘A strengthened United Nations and the reasonable and peaceful solution of group conflicts are the obvious conditions for the possibility that humanity and its common achievements shall become the object of group narcissism’ (ibid.: 91-92). In *To Have or to Be?*, Fromm sets out in detail a series of further measures: from prohibiting all brainwashing methods in industrial and political advertising to creating the conditions for participatory democracy, to separating scientific research from application in industry and defence, to replacing

bureaucratic management with humanistic management, to liberating women from patriarchal domination, to introducing a guaranteed yearly income that would ensure real freedom and independence (see further Fromm, 1976/1997: 141-164).

Every now and then, true to his dictum that 'ideas do have an effect on man if the idea is lived by the one who teaches it; if it is personified by the teacher' (Fromm, 1981: 42), Fromm himself left the ivory towers of academia and his private practice as a psychoanalyst to campaign actively against the Vietnam War, the Cold War, nuclear and biological armament, hunger and sickness in the Third World, and much more. For 'man can be human only in a climate in which he can expect that he and his children will live to see the next year, and many more years to come' (Fromm, 1964: 94; see further Wilde, 2004: 135-136). Though Fromm hardly ever saw mankind reach any closer to its great potential for productivity, his sense of hope remained unscathed throughout. As he wrote in *The Revolution of Hope* –his pugnacious response to America's dehumanised situation in 1968–, 'to hope means to be ready at every moment for that which is not yet born, and yet not become desperate if there is no birth in our lifetime' (Fromm, 1968: 9). Fromm's utopianism was, and is, the utopianism of the 'awake', of hard-headed realists who shed all illusions and fully appreciate the difficulties (Fromm, 1976/1997: 141).

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