



Social Roots of Insensibility and Narcissism

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Abstract

The aim of this talk/paper is to briefly describe the influences on a human being that result in the feelings of helplessness, selfish attachment to objects and/or people, indifference, and a tendency to seek refuge in political, corporate, or religious hierarchies. Man as a social being is today faced with a situation of having to realize his or her personality within a “sick society” that neglects its members and overemphasizes hierarchical structures. The paper also aims at detecting the impact of the media on the production of depressive passivity that prevents empathy and creates a “prison without walls.”

A special dimension of the presentation has been to connect Freud’s interpretation of narcissism with the contemporary spread of this phenomenon due to the powerful influence of modern mass media. Narcissism as a phenomenon goes beyond the field of psychology and becomes a kind of behavioural matrix that can have far-reaching effects on all dimensions and forms of organizing social communities.

Keywords: Empathy, psychiatry, religion, art, philosophy, love

Distance is Often a Precondition for Closeness

Each contribution to the discussions within the symposium talks actually means adding tiles to the emerging mosaic image.¹ Eventually, this picture will be different for each participant. The final appearance of the mosaic that everyone will construct for themselves will also depend on the way they focus on the essentials.

Most often, they will only see and comment on specific

segments.² But those who manage to overcome the need to observe the “tile pixels” closely will be able to see the whole. One needs a distance. The artwork warns us: if we recognize brush strokes in life, it is a sign that we are standing too close.

What is valid for human relations can also be observed in the relations between ethnic communities and entire

2 This outlook and the necessity of education for the new media (on which McLuhan lucidly wrote in his book *Understanding Media*, based on anthropological insights) corresponds today to the need of “obtaining a broader picture,” of using the “wide-angle lens” or the way of observing (thinking) that will be able to gather and constructively interpret the largest possible number of facts. Cf. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London and New York: McGraw Hill, 1964). An interpretation of McLuhan’s thought by the author of this text is given in the introduction to the book *McLuhan, najava filozofije medija* [McLuhan, a preliminary notice on media philosophy] (Zagreb: Centre for Media Philosophy and Research, 2010).

1 This paper is based on the talk I gave at the conference *Compassionate Society and Empathic Civilization in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Utopia or a Transformative Idea for a Better Future* (March 2022, Mostar), and is part of the research project *The Idea of Tolerance in the World of Contemporary Divisions* at University North.

nations, in peace and in war. Being too close often means being part of the mosaic, a colour on the painter's palette, a sound, an instrument or means... We must get out of the picture to actually see it.

Man is a potential work of art. The same goes for human relationships. There is a direct analogy: if we stand too close to another person and life, we will see details that destroy beauty, behaviours and mental states that go beyond the expected modes of behaviour. In order to be what we can be, it is necessary to leave and return.

The phenomenon of closeness often precludes any kind of objectivity. Immersion in the subject/person of our analysis, socializing, research, or being takes away the much-needed width. It is no coincidence that Kundera once wrote that the person leaving and abandoning is the one who loves the most... This is one of the reasons why the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the possibilities of empathic action and the reopening of nations for each other, can sometimes be better seen and understood by persons who departed from Bosnia and Herzegovina a long time ago, although never really leaving it...

Of course, this is not the rule, but an attitude that can well be defended.

Empathy in Art and Philosophy

The discourse on empathy is reminiscent of the once current theory of *Einfühlung* in aesthetics,³ which tried to explain the beautiful and aesthetic dimension by immersing the observer in the work of art. The theory has meanwhile been abandoned as an approach claiming to explain art, but it is quite certain that its elements still live today in every relation to anything, including the work of art.

Empathy is certainly a phenomenon that puts modernity to a test. In a world where we have become strangers to each other, empathy is an ability that will primarily be associated with a person of faith or belonging to a religious community.

3 In the second book of his four-volume aesthetics, Danko Grlić brings, among other things, a cross-section of his thoughts on the *Einfühlung* phenomenon. He thus points out that Novalis, searching for the object as a humanized symbol of our inner life, found in empathy "the fundamental source of all human relationships and all art." He also recalls Herder's position that "a sensitive person feels himself as a part of everything" and quotes Robert Vischer's view of *Einfühlung* as a power of perception "that is always unconsciously symbolic and by which we bring things... fully into our subjectivity." In this context, a parallel is drawn with the approach to a poetic work, which can be enjoyed "only if we feel (with) that work."

Grlić emphasizes the psychological approach to the work of art by the *Einfühlung* theorists, thus creating a context for understanding empathy in the psychological dimensions of human correlations within communities. In this context, art and the aesthetic theories of *Einfühlung* have much to offer. Cf. Danko Grlić, *Estetika II* [Aesthetics II] (Zagreb: Naprijed, 1983), p. 299.

Various forms of media empathy (such as humanitarian aid actions that are widely covered by the media) are not a part of empathic action, although empathy can support them. The laws of media action and the power of the media have taken the initiative in the realms of "determinative reasons of will." In the same way as Kant once established the relationship between legality and morality (and did not consider the mother's act of rescuing a child from the river as a moral act), the laws of media action undermine the foundations of a human act of empathy and turn it into participation in a media spectacle.

Empathy is often featured in theological discourse. Thus, the Earth suffers because of the original sin of Adam and Eve (which is today increasingly interpreted as giving up being in God, i.e. abandoning the Order of God and turning to the world, the consequence of which is modern techno-scientific polytheism). In this context, the Earth (like the Mother) felt empathy for her children that she had given birth to and that would return to her. The Earth mourns because the spirit is leaving human bodies. The body becomes a machine in a civilization that has abandoned God.

The notion of empathy also refers to the Christian understanding of the duality of Jesus's position (Son and God). Jesus often behaves completely as a human being. This, of course, can be due to the anthropocentrism of human language, but can serve as a basis for different interpretations.

David Lamont's study on "The Empathy of God" lists Biblical verses that unequivocally testify to the human dimension of Jesus's behaviour: "Jesus experienced pity (Mk. 1:41), anger (Mk. 3:5), deep sighing (Mk. 7:34), compassion (Mk. 8:2), surprise (Mk. 6:6), disappointment (Mk. 8:17; 9:19), and distress (Lk. 22:15). He is never said to have laughed or smiled, but he did feel joy (Lk. 10:21), and love (Lk. 7:36-50). He was tempted (Mt. 4:1-11), concerned for his mother (Jn. 19:25-26), and even more poignantly he wept, 'deeply moved in spirit and troubled' at the death of his dear friend Lazarus (Jn. 11:33-35). In short, Jesus experienced the whole range of human emotions that any living person experiences."⁴

The first two hundred years of Christianity, Erich Fromm explains, were dominated by understanding Jesus as a human being who ascended to the level of divinity. This was followed by a period that embraced the concept of Jesus's divine personality, which is now attributed to him as something he had from the very beginning.

4 David Lamont, "The Empathy of God: A Biblical and Theological Study of the Christological Implications of John 11:35" (MTheol thesis, McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, ON, 2001), p. 7.

Regardless of the theological question of the divine character of Jesus, his behaviour testifies to the empathy that has become a kind of programmatic character of Christianity. Therefore, a discourse on empathy is always a discourse on Jesus, while a discourse on Jesus is – a discourse on the necessity of human empathy.

A discourse on empathy is particularly welcome in environments that have suffered the horrors of war (famine, imprisonment, rape, murder, even mass murder). In this sense, Bosnia and Herzegovina is hungry and thirsty for this discourse, for understanding, compassion, confession, apology, and the restoration of trust. Bosnia and Herzegovina has become a Bermuda triangle of mistrust and caution created by military means. But if Hölderlin was right when he said that where danger grows, salvation grows as well, then Bosnia and Herzegovina, with its past, its tradition of good neighbourly relations, the coexistence of believers of different religions in the same area – is a place where dialogue and empathy can find a formula for restoring a civilized society.

At the core of the phenomenon of empathy is – *love*. Both philosophically and theologically, love is a source that implies empathy as such. Only pathological forms of expressing love (those reaching levels of physical torture or extermination) cloud the clear waters. Then it is necessary to clean the mud again and establish the relations of tolerance, empathy, understanding, and rekindled love.

In that sense, the story of empathy is at the same time a story of love, fading love, that is, a civilization that, having taken the reins of the cultures of East and West, paved a way without empathy and with the lowest degree of tolerance for the other and different.

The story of empathy is the story of how, as the “Christian Socrates” Kierkegaard would say, the unequal can become equal, and that precisely is – love.

Perpetrator – Victim – Empathy

The discourse on compassion is a religious issue, as well as philosophical and psychological, even psychiatric. The philosophical dimension of the phenomenon of empathy (with excursions into the literary, social-scientific, and psychiatric fields) has been analysed, among others, by Lou Agosta in his book *Empathy in the Context of Philosophy*. It is an attempt to contextualize empathy through the prism of the opinions of Jaspers, Heidegger, Scheler, Husserl, and other philosophers, and in the literary dimensions of Goethe and Thomas Mann. Philosophy seems to be trying (after the failure of connecting with Marx’s “revolutionary subject”) to

find a universal principle in empathy.⁵

In a similar way, but from a different perspective, Viktor E. Frankl has introduced the idea of sense into the world of Freud’s successors as a new paradigm of questioning the necessity of changing human life. Particularly in his book *Der unbewußte Gott*,⁶ Frankl proposes a kind of reconciliation between philosophy, theology, psychoanalysis, and psychiatry. At the level of the unconscious, there is no longer only Freud’s Id, but also an unconscious sense of religiosity or, to put it simply – an unconscious God.

By reinterpreting Freud’s attitude towards religion, Frankl has actually inverted him, so he does not see God the Father as a reflection of the patriarchal family relations, but rather the father of the family as an image of God. His approach is significant, among other things, because he argues for the need of cooperation between psychiatry and religion, as well as between logotherapy and theology. It is certain that a theorist who could leave the Nazi camp only after the end of World War II has something to say to the nations that rebuilt camps after World War II, torturing people and destroying the sense of human existence.

The discovery of mirror neurons in the human brain indicates that none of our actions is ever lost. There will always be someone to mirror our activity in some of their own actions by interpreting what they have seen. Metaphorically speaking, mirror neurons call for responsible behaviour, because we suggest forms of behaviour to others even when we do not intend to. And although there is no reliable evidence of their existence, the warning of consciously or unconsciously transmitting a way of life, existence, and work is still valid.

The human brain contains many unexplained secrets of human behaviour. Among other things, Marshall McLuhan has focused his work on proving the connection between different writing techniques and forms of metaphysics and theology in relation to the phonetic and pictorial scripts of East and West. With his experience as a prisoner of the Nazi concentration camps, Frankl reminds us that for young people, existential security does not mean that they are making sense of their lives, which can result in loss of empathy and even a large number of suicides.

Theoretical discussions of empathy should, of course, be supplemented by experiences of the birth and destruction of empathy in specific societies. The social context of law

⁵ Cf. Lou Agosta, *Empathy in the Context of Philosophy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁶ Viktor E. Frankl, *The Unconscious God: Psychotherapy and Theology* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975).

is the environment and the right medium for detecting the emergence, development, and death of empathy. Sick societies, and these are certainly societies without empathy, lead their citizens into conflicts and wars. In this context, reflecting on the relationship between empathy, sympathy, mercy, and/or love is especially interesting in the case of former Yugoslavia. Particularly as the country had been developing tolerance and empathy for the others and divergent for centuries. Of course, these were never ideal relations between different religions, nations, cultures, or worldviews, but Bosnia and Herzegovina was a kind of training ground for confrontation between differences in a land that everyone experienced as their own.

At the end of the 20th century, Bosnia and Herzegovina sank into conflicts, hatred, war, and crime. It became a testing ground for phenomena such as hatred, intolerance, nationalism, ethno-business, corruption, exclusion, loss of empathy... The tradition of cooperation between the peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina has given way to frauds, political games, conquests of territories by spreading influence, verbal antagonisms...

Without going into the genesis of disasters that befell the peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is necessary to realize that its reality raises questions that would be interesting for any study of social dynamics, social psychology, and ultimately psychiatry.

It is justified and urgent to raise questions, precisely in Bosnia and Herzegovina, about the possibility of forgiveness, the victims' ability to empathize, questions about the ability of religious hierarchies to develop empathy instead of hatred in their followers. The suffering was huge. All the peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina have gone through their Golgotha. Unfortunately, Bosniaks have gone through more than that. They were condemned to extermination and the circumstances needn't have been very different for the plan of destroying a nation to materialize.

In Yugoslavia, blood feud was largely eradicated. But the recent war experience speaks of a "transfer" of blood feud into a kind of generational revenge that is carried by the same passion as blood feud, but disguised in a context that does not sound so sinister at first. Crimes against Bosniaks and Croats were justified by the "Ottoman conquest," the crimes and mass graves in Jasenovac, the real and imagined calamities that the Serbian people had suffered throughout history.

Myths played their part, and the electronic and digital distribution of myths through the mass media industrialized the ideological image of the Serbs as sufferers threatened by all the nations that surrounded them.

Of course, generational revenge cannot be set as a historical rule, as a matrix of national behaviour, but some events in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as in Ukraine, supply history with elements of subjective arbitrariness characteristic of waiving respect for law. The Serbian people, driven by the ideology of revenge and defence of Orthodoxy, stepped into an abyss. Guided by blind leaders, they agreed to commit the most heinous crimes committed in Europe since World War II.

The religious hierarchy of Eastern Orthodoxy played an important role in all this. The former "modest and symbolic" blessing of weapons has today, in the case of Ukraine, been turned into open advocacy of war for the holy Orthodox cause. If human anatomy offers a key to understanding the anatomy of apes (as Marx once suggestively said), then the key to understanding the crimes committed in Bosnia and Herzegovina is most certainly clearer after the explicit statements of the Orthodox religious hierarchy on the war in Ukraine.

Writing about the usurpation of religious sentiment, Fritjof Schuon once noted, among other things: "One of the abuses indirectly bequeathed to us by the Renaissance is the confusion, in one and the same sentimental cult or in one and the same 'humanism', of religion and fatherland: this amalgam is all the more deplorable in that it occurs in men who profess to represent traditional values and who thus compromise what by rights they should defend."⁷

Huxley reasoned similarly in his *Perennial Philosophy*: "What happens when ministers of religion are led into these temptations is clearly illustrated by the history of the Roman Church. Because Catholic Christianity taught a version of the Perennial Philosophy, it produced a succession of great saints. But because the Perennial Philosophy was overlaid with an excessive amount of sacramentalism and with an idolatrous preoccupation with things in time, the less saintly members of its hierarchy were exposed to enormous and quite unnecessary temptations and, duly succumbing to them, launched out into persecution, simony, power politics, secret diplomacy, high finance and collaboration with despots."⁸

In this context, the question of empathy faces some new doubts and paradoxical situations. In what way and how much empathy can a victim have towards an industrialized

7 Fritjof Schuon, "Usurpations of Religious Feeling," *Studies in Comparative Religion* 2/2 (Spring 1968), http://www.studiesincomparativereligion.com/public/articles/Usurpations_of_Religious_Feeling-by_Fritjof_Schuon.aspx (last accessed on June 20, 2022).

8 Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1947), p. 310.

religious mind that is convinced of being right even after all the crimes? What does it mean to have empathy with the monstrous mind of a mass murderer who throws his victims into mass graves? How to have empathy in situations in which a religious hierarchy inspired by a religious ideology (not faith) digs up graves and transfers bones to secondary or even more distant and remote graves? Can a person who does not ask for forgiveness be forgiven? Can one believe in coexistence with a person who has not experienced a human catharsis, but still considers continuing to exterminate those who are the other and different?

There is No Empathy without Love

A word whose depth has been erased by modern civilization – love – is today largely a substitute for the word “partner”. “My love” is the person with whom I cultivate egoism in two. Speaking of the first, second, or third great love means speaking about the first, second, or third husband or wife. Love has ceased to be a principle in the world of quantification and trading in material and spiritual creations.⁹

Where love is reduced to the level of superficial everyday life, there will hardly be room for empathy or, say, tolerance. The only possible product of egoistic love can be egoistic empathy or tolerance as bearing with someone in the harshest sense of the word.

It is therefore important how we understand love, because it is from being in love (in one way or another) that the feeling of empathy and tolerance arises.

So are we talking about *eros* or *philia*. Is it *amor*, *agape*, or *caritas* at work? Is love carnal, charitable, God-fearing, debauched, selfish, or is it something that transcends emotion and allows us to unite the Unspeakable and the Universal in ourselves?

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle spoke of love as friendship (*philia*), something that characterized the unity of diversity in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Unfortunately, during the war, this *philia* turned into a “filial branch” of hatred that strove to destroy and almost destroyed every possibility of love for the other and different.

Establishing “filial” hatred instead of *philia* occurs where the political prevails over the moral, where national is superimposed to human, where love is to be limited within the borders of states, regions, entities, cantons, languages,

nations, skin colours, religions, worldviews...¹⁰

The place of *philia* is then taken by political trade and the heart becomes a fan of small, human, warm-blooded gods narcissistically staring at their villas and themselves in the courtyards of their villas. Bosnia and Herzegovina has also been a testing ground for understanding these tendencies: the leaders of ethno-nationalisms are the leaders of new nomenclatures, where war waged by peaceful means¹¹ is perfectly suitable for the development of corrupt octopuses.

Such is Nietzsche’s critique of the Western man, the man of resentment, a person who sees love not as, in today’s words, a platform from which to act, but as an ordinary, expendable physical or mental emotion that arises as a consequence determined by another body. At this level, referring to humanity actually implies giving up on the possible higher dimensions of humanity, without which man is just a walnut shell floating in the ocean of determinism.¹²

One of the rather abundant sources of misunderstanding concerning Islam is found in the stereotype that deprived Islam of love. In his book *The Heart of Islam*, Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes: “In Christianity it is said that God is Love, and often from that perspective Islam is criticized for having a conception of God that lacks love... Islam states that God is Love, since this is one of His Divine Names, but it does not identify God solely with love, for He is also Knowledge and Light, Justice and Majesty as well as Peace and Beauty, but He is never without love and His Love is essential to the creation of the universe and our relation with Him.”¹³

Modernity also remembers Scheller’s attempt to return meaning to the good in relation to the utilitarian, to awaken higher levels of love in man that would unmistakably guide man to the good. Simply put, one does not love someone, but that something in someone that participates in the eternal. We are a kind of medium for the universal. Unfortunately, like any medium, we have drawn attention to ourselves and declared ourselves as the persons to be loved, respected, and

10 More on the trend of secular gods in: Sead Alić, *Bog u nacionalnom dresu* [God in a national jersey] (Varaždin and Koprivnica: University North, 2021).

11 Texts and statements in newspaper columns and talks, especially: <https://index.ba/akademik-sead-alic-za-index-ba-supotpisnici-i-garanti-mira-moraju-konacno-i-definitivno-završiti-rat-u-bosni-i-hercegovini/>, <https://index.ba/akademik-alic-za-index-ba-dobrovoljacka-kolona-pravnika-u-povlacenju/>, <https://index.ba/alic-mafijaski-ruski-rulet/> <https://index.ba/vrhovi-ledenih-nacionalnih-piramida-obasjani-suncem-ali-dolje/>.

12 In this context, Nietzsche’s analysis of Antichrist is interesting, as he finds this anti-Christianity in false morality or hypocrisy (double standards).

13 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity* (New York: PerfectBound, 2002), p. 221.

9 Fromm’s entire work shifts the emphasis from Freud’s sexual drive to the need for togetherness and love as a principle of interpersonal relationships. Cf. esp. Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (London: Thorsons, 1995).

the like.

Frithjof Schuon writes about love in a similar way: "Love never belongs to the creature exclusively. Christ cared only for the heavenly Fatherland which 'is not of this world'; this is sufficient to make one not deny the natural fact of an earthly fatherland, but abstain from any abusive – and above all illogical – worship of one's country of origin."¹⁴ Where is empathy today, in the age of great fatherlands, and what prevents it from being at work?

In the love that God has for man, theology finds the elements necessary for the establishment of a kind of religious psychotherapy. Thus, Mijo Nikić, in a kind of manual called *Biblical Psychotherapy*, bases his psychotherapy in Jesus's addresses to people. It is there, the author claims, that the "norms of psychotherapy are set."¹⁵ The author further brings ten psychotherapeutic commandments that could bring peace to a person. The commandments are that we must know, accept, love, and change ourselves; that we must live in truth and have a clear conscience; and that we must carry our cross and forgive, be free and love God.¹⁶ In this context, obsessive-compulsive neurosis is analysed as a result of suppression, the aspiration of insufficiently loved persons to be the "object" of someone's unconditional love, the feeling of worthlessness and insecurity, the mechanisms of hiding behind armours, depression, suppression, projection, isolation, aggression, guilt, and other symptoms of a disease that, according to Nikić, is curable by believing in a God who loves each and every individual. That love should and can be a support for gaining self-confidence as the basis of mental health.

Possessiveness Vs. Empathy

Although one has long ceased to speculate about whether man is by nature good or evil, whether he is a *tabula rasa* or comes into the world with ideas that he merely remembers while learning, I would almost say in an almost Rousseauan manner that man is a being of empathy whom the society prevents from realizing his essential determinants. But I would not try to prove it; instead, I would try to outline the possible paths of return to the originally human, to empathy as a horizon of man's relationship with other persons, animals, plants – to otherness (as the German classical idealists would say) – through the context in which empathy is developed or lost.

14 Schuon, "Usurpations of Religious Feeling" (as in n. 7).

15 Mijo Nikić, *Biblijska psihoterapija* [Biblical psychotherapy] (Zagreb: Zaklada biskup Josip Lang, 2019).

16 Although this handbook is written as a guide to the widest range of potential users, thus necessarily simplifying in attitudes and instructions, a consistency in suggestions cannot be denied.

The process of socialization of every new human being is a kind of training, both in terms of the necessity of accepting the existing value systems and in a more profound sense. From a young age, we have before us systems of linguistic symbols (speech, grammar, logic) that determine the direction and framework of our possible development.

For today's children, the utopian thought of Jean Jacques Rousseau, a great educator with controversial personal experiences, is unattainable.

Rousseau saw it in the following way: "Take a child fully as a child, and a young man fully as a young man; do not push him too early into the society's schemes and into his parents' moulds, but leave him his nature; raise him by self-education; do not order him around and do not forbid, but curb him instead; try to capture the will rather than limbs and instincts..."¹⁷

Rousseau recommended that a child should not learn to read until the age of twelve: "Reading is the scourge of childhood." What use is there of reading if the child hates it? When we tell fables to the children – Rousseau writes – they often understand the opposite (show a penchant for vice).¹⁸

Similar to his thesis "Our first teachers of philosophy are our feet, our hands (and replacing them with books means learning to use someone else's reason)"¹⁹ was the reasoning of Rudolf Steiner, the teacher of anthroposophy and the first editor of Goethe's collected works, based on whose teachings the Montessori school was founded (which, among other things, insists on play, movement, touch, and personal experience and which bases knowledge on experience thus gained).²⁰

That this is not ungrounded has been proven by our modern age, in which experience is gained by hypnotically staring at screens, where socialization begins in a family where parents often do not have time for children and leave them to television and social networks.

A fragile sense of fragility thus collides with the cruel mechanisms of communication on social networks, which slowly but surely turn a young being into a fighter for survival, an egoistic individual with narcissistic forms of

17 *Klasici političkog mišljenja 2: Od Lockeja do Maxa Webera* [Classic political thinkers 2: From Locke to Max Weber] ed. Hans Maier and Horst Denzer (Zagreb: Golden Marketing, 1998), p. 90.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 108.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 121.

20 More on Steiner at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VHkkEWgLqAM&t=46s>.

expressing his or her being. Selfies, videos, Photoshop, and other, simpler tools for improving one's appearance and bringing it closer to the ideal or stereotype are available to everyone.

In such a world, empathy is a form of showing weakness.

Rarely can a young human being be helped by religion, which is often politicized and turned into a fan club. True faith is deeper and hides in spaces of the soul that the secular forms of religion and the secular holiness of politicians and sports, film, television, or social networks celebrities cannot reach...

New religions have replaced the traditional ones: religions that provide a sense of community, recognizable social groups, but that have at the same time changed the written or unwritten laws, or rather revelations. "Indeed, the popularity of the Olympic Games," Fromm writes in his book *To Have or to Be?*, "is in itself a symbolic expression of Western paganism. They celebrate the pagan hero: the winner, the strongest, the most self-assertive, while overlooking the dirty mixture of business and publicity that characterizes the contemporary imitation of the Greek Olympic Games."²¹

In almost every man of modern civilization, the need for possession develops through life. All the means of socialization today seduce us and make us think that what we possess is ours. Thus, the flower from Goethe's poem, which he does not pluck, but rather returns to it to admire its beauty, ends with today's man in a beautifully shaped crystal vase, which we also possess.

"The first one who dared to say, 'This is mine, and found some stupid people to believe it, was the true founder of a civilized society.' Someone may have saved the human race from crimes, wars, murders, misery, and horrors had he shouted to his neighbours while pulling out stakes and filling in ditches: 'Don't listen to that deceiver! You are lost if you forget that the fruits belong to everyone and the land to no one.'"²²

That is how Rousseau saw it.

In a similar spirit, Karl Marx wrote: "Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only *ours* when we have it – when it exists for us as capital, or when it is directly possessed, eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited, etc., – in short, when it is *used* by us... In the place of *all* physical and mental senses there has therefore come the sheer estrangement of *all* these senses, the sense of *having*. The human being had to be reduced to this absolute poverty

in order that he might yield his inner wealth to the outer world."²³

It is indicative that the human civilization has given birth to dystopian rather than utopian visions. In the context of that truth, we should not get carried away with the idea of abolishing private property. History has shown that when reality is not at the level of the idea, it ends in Gulags, with millions of victims killed by the mismatch of ideas and the reality, or by the establishment of a hierarchy whose main goal is to maintain and restore its own pyramidal structure.

But we can and must talk about the consequences that the ideologies, the so-called policies, human hypocrisy, and the lack of critical thinking and confrontation produce in the developing soul.

To put it simply, we could ask: How is it possible to cultivate or self-cultivate a healthy, productive, creative moral being in an environment that Fromm would call sick? Sick society is the context of our lives. It is sick in almost all its dimensions. Sick in its focus on possession, in its deluded infatuation with new types of holiness, in the support it gives to ideologies of division among people, in the fact that it forgets that we are all part of the human race...

We are all loved, only in different ways. The dominant way today is a sadistic form of love, which is, according to Fromm, a form of love based on ruling over others, on a sense of power, on the production of subordination. Out of fear of everything unpredictable, man and, I would say, entire states develop this sadistic type of love for individuals, communities, nations, religions.

A sadist is a weak, lifeless and helpless person who compensates for his or her lack by manipulating others. Here Fromm talks about the cowardly transformation of a sadistic caterpillar into God, and we could and should rightly ask ourselves – are we not surrounded by this new kind of gods who will never turn into butterflies?

Eventually, but in fact somewhere at the beginning.

Everything is questionable, because we have become the servomechanisms of the products of our hands. The techno-scientific sphere is superior to everything spiritual. Possession has become a fundamental human value. All this generates superficiality, hatred, and ultimately wars. Every war (taken in this context) has been prepared for thousands of years. The sparks that led to it are only a trigger for establishing a world without love, empathy, or tolerance.

21 Erich Fromm, *To Have or to Be?* (London and New York: Continuum, 2008), p. 117.

22 *Klasici političkog mišljenja* (as in n. 17), p. 51.

23 Karl Marx, "Private Property and Communism," in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/comm.htm> (last accessed on June 20, 2022).

It is the task of all people of the spirit, including us, to make an attempt at theoretical reflection and practical action aimed at bringing man back to his natural habitat, which is the Universe that we carry within us in love universally understood.

Martin Lings offers some words that unite: "In speaking of the majority, the Qur'an says: *It is not the eyes that are blind but the hearts*. This shows – and it would be strange if it were otherwise – that the Quranic perspective agrees with that of the whole ancient world, both of East and of West, in attributing vision to the heart and in using this word to indicate not only the bodily organ of that name but also what this corporeal centre gives access to, namely the centre of the soul, which itself is the gateway to a higher 'heart', namely the Spirit. Thus 'heart' is often to be found as a synonym of 'intellect', not in the sense in which this word is misused today but in the full sense of the Latin *intellectus*, that is, the faculty which perceives the transcendent."²⁴

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24 Martin Lings, *What is Suffism?* (Lahore: Suhai Academy, 2005), p. 48.

