

## **The Modern Man between Existence and Possession**

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**Abstract:** Eric Fromm's<sup>1</sup> work – “To Have or to Be” – allows at least some reflection and elaboration of ideas especially as we stand at a certain distance in time of its appearance. We will follow up, based on the main axes provided by the author, possible elaborations of the “to have” and “to be” paradigms. Some fundamentally different existential areas involve different philosophies of life, powered by autogenous backgrounds, self-sufficient, clearly bounded by an area with strong axiological and epistemological accents.

We shall also follow some nuances that enrich the German author's original theses: the shift from having to “to be”, the description of horizons that are specific to both paradigms, conceptual extensions of the sociological perspective (adopted by the author) as possible interpretative returns from the domain of “to be” towards the one delineated by the “to have”. A fruitful direction of our exploration is the highlighting of the impersonality (collectively determined) of the world of “to have” and the need to customize the existence (in a selective and sober philosophical point of view) for a solid settlement of “to be”.

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## *Argument*

In 1976 Erich Fromm wrote “To Have or to Be?”, a book which became very famous (in Germany alone it was reprinted 25 times in 18 years). The German author's work touches very well the nerve of our materialistic and consumerist era, remaining modern and up to date. Therefore we can agree with Roger Perron's earlier appreciation on Fromm which is described as: “open minded, carried towards vast and generous considerations regarding the evolution of our western societies, the limitations they impose and the destiny of individuals living in them (...)”.<sup>2</sup> Although several decades have passed since the brilliant sociological, psychoanalytical and philosophical analysis undertaken in this work was published, its theses prove to be more necessary and more pertinent than ever. Since it was written and until the present, the tireless enthusiasm of

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<sup>1</sup> Erich Fromm (1900-1990) psychoanalyst, sociologist and philosopher; he developed social studies impregnated with Freudian vision on human behaviour. Forced to immigrate into the United States (in 1934), Fromm got to experience the consumer society. Established, at the end of his life, at Locarno (Switzerland), he wrote “To Have or to Be” as an advocacy for re-analyzing the situation of the contemporary human being regarding consumerism.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Perron, *Histoire de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2009/1988), 95.

consumerism added dimensions and aspects unimaginable half a century ago. In this context, we might ask ourselves: why is the work of Erich Fromm still so little known and why are there so few references to it? One possible answer could be the one suggested by M. Maccobi: “Why has Fromm's work been so neglected? To start with, his ability to write directly to a large general audience as in *The Art of Loving*, which was a best seller in the late 50s, made him suspect to the academic Mandarins whose criteria for profundity includes incomprehensibility to the uninitiated. In fact, Fromm provoked defensiveness and even a kind of antipathy from academics he termed alienated and psychoanalysts he criticized as bureaucratic in their technique and poorly educated in the humanities and social sciences. Furthermore, Fromm would not fit himself into a neat intellectual category.”<sup>1</sup>

Being oriented toward sociological observation and sustained by the possibilities of psychoanalysis<sup>2</sup>, Fromm's theses reach existential issues and aspects of political philosophy that can hardly be put in conventional patterns. Maybe that is why he received such “appreciations”: “I'm not talking here of some of the softest attempts to reconcile psychoanalysis with its social base, like those attempts of Erich Fromm or of American cultural anthropology: this lacking principle of eclecticism has little in common either with psychoanalysis or with social criticism.”<sup>3</sup> Despite this, ideas can be raised and developed based on the material provided by some very pertinent interpretation of the author. A careful reading of the text in question allows developments devoid of the author's argumentative pathos, which was perhaps too close to the novelty of the incriminated phenomenon and also located on an indubitable critical and emotionally involved position. Another motivation of our philosophical extensions based on the text in Fromm's book is represented by the sureness of a certain *participation mystique* of the author, of an emotionality with critical accents that wants to denounce the vices of the contemporary world, as in his *The Art of Loving*, published in 1956: “Modern capitalism needs men who cooperate smoothly and in large numbers; who want to consume more and more; and whose tastes are standardized and can be easily influenced and anticipated.”<sup>4</sup> At present, we are much more tolerant (perhaps because we have been absorbed by the tempting and multicoloured universe of *to have*, at least at a social level) with the mechanisms of the consumerist society. The distance in time and the normality of the consumerist phenomenon (hence its inevitable trivialization), allows a more emotionally-detached regard – the only one that guarantees a philosophical reading.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Maccoby, “The Two Voices of Erich Fromm: Prophet and Analyst,” *Society* 5 (July/August 1995): 72-82.

<sup>2</sup> Through which Erich Fromm, together with Karen Horney and Harry Stack Sullivan, enrol in a direction of thought that Tzvetan Todorov would later describe as: “In the case of Erich Fromm, another tradition starts from the Marxist criticism of Freudianism,” (...) “The representatives of this psychoanalytic current deplored at Freud the lack of interest in social interaction (...).” In Tzvetan Todorov, *Viața comună, Eseu de antropologie generală* (Common life. An essay of general anthropology) (Bucharest: Editura Humanitas, 2009/1995), 62.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Castel, *Le psychanalisme, L'ordre psychanalytique et le pouvoir* (Paris: Flammarion, 1981), 251.

<sup>4</sup> Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney: Harper Perennial, Modern Classics, 1956/2006), 79.

Our approach is situated on a meta-position toward the German psychoanalyst's interpretation, on the chain of possible conceptualizations and developments of the key concepts from the author's text. No matter how great the distance at which we stand to the original text, we cannot deny the deep impact that the text in question poses to any reader. Fromm's book represents, even after many years since it was written, a reading which is fertile in inspirations that can invite to unexpected developments.

We will use throughout the text the two phrases "*to have*" and "*to be*" (always written in italics: *to have* and *to be*) in order to preserve and to highlight the German author's ideation. He understands them as defining orientations for two radically different existential ways, each covering an extremely extended human area. The two orientations are defined as follows by the author in question: "In the existential way of *to have* the relationship with the world is that of the desire for possession and (effective) owning, a relationship in which I want to turn anyone and anything into possession, including myself.

In the existential way of *to be* we must distinguish two forms of being. One is the opposite of *to have*; (...) It means vitality and a genuine relationship with the world. The other form of *to be* is the opposite of *appearance* and it refers to the real nature, to the genuine reality of a person opposed to the deceiving appearance, as it is described in the etymology of the word *to be*."<sup>1</sup>

It is also necessary to mention that the two verbs of the Romanian, English and German languages (and in other languages as well) have, besides being auxiliary verbs, very many connotations, under-meanings and collateral implications that allow paraphrases and interpretations of the most diverse kinds. Thus, for the verb "to have" we can find in the Explanatory Dictionary of Romanian Language no less than 17 meanings, more or less connected to each other (while in the *Wahrig*, the dictionary of the German language, 9 different meanings are given). Both verbs, the Romanian – *a avea* – and the German – *haben* –, have a common origin, namely the Latin: *habere*. For the verb *a fi* we find in the same Explanatory Dictionary of Romanian Language 8 meanings and 14 grammatical constructions (the verb *sein* has 8 meanings given in the *Wahrig*). We also have to mention that in German there are two words identical in spelling, but written differently: *sein* – the verb "to be" and *Sein* – the noun that designates the existing, the existence (as in Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*). All this lexicological richness allows, of course, the most diverse and unpredictable interpretations and conceptualizations.

### The sociological presentation

The fundamental thesis of Fromm's work is that the late medieval man, freed from feudal seclusion and thrown into the victorious capitalism, was quickly disappointed by the unfulfilment of the unanimous expectations, which were apparently legitimate and based on the enthusiasm of industrial development. The capitalist society came with promises which proved to be unsustainable, the man is not free and master of his own destiny,<sup>2</sup> but subject to material addictions that are staggeringly and threateningly

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<sup>1</sup> Erich Fromm, *Haben oder Sein* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), 35.

<sup>2</sup> By Duane Schulz and Sydney Schulz: "Erich Fromm, personality theorist and peace activist, used to auto-attribute his interest in abnormal behavior to the earlier contact with fanaticism

generated by industry and technology. Even if the main thesis of capitalism stated, in Cațavencu's<sup>1</sup> spirit, that: "I want progress at any cost", this proved to be an illusion, a slogan or a good lie to be used up only during election campaigns. The only exit from this situation, in Fromm's opinion, is the transition from the consumerist dimension of *to have* towards the existential dimension, impregnated by the humanistic values of *to be*.

The first part of Fromm's work begins with the following statement: "The alternative *to have* and *to be* is not obvious to ordinary mind. *To have* seems to be something very normal in life, in order to live, we must have (possess) things, yes, we need to have things so that we can enjoy them."<sup>2</sup> It can be found that *to be* is commonly understood in terms of *to have* as if the latter term could define the being. However, this is, according to the German psychoanalyst, only the diverted way to see things, the essential and defining ones being replaced, in a rebarbative and conjectural rhetoric, by the secondary (in the etymological meaning). We must point out however that the influence that the collective, namely the social, exerts on the understanding that we give at a certain point to some terms or concepts, is not negligible. We notice that often, the meaning of some phrases or formulations is hijacked, even distorted by the collective/social group in order to be placed in the general flow of wide acceptance, in the naturalness of "that's the way it is" or "that's the way it is done". And as long as what it is done because "that's the way it is done" is not analyzed and questioned in order to be restored to the original, things can perpetuate forever in a dysfunctional way. Moreover, they enter the path of widely and unconditionally accepted normalcy, becoming natural and unproblematic, without apparent cracks, immutable and released of any possible counter-arguments. Precisely at this point – of drowsiness or intellectual numbness – the work in question comes with a "strong hand" and with a detailed analysis.

Fromm makes a careful and well documented critique of the contemporary consumerism – the field of "*haben*", *to have* – that he opposes to some old and traditional ethical, philosophical or religious values inspired by the great spiritual and mystical tradition of humanity: the teachings of Buddha, Lao Tze, the Christian Gospels, Meister Eckhart etc. In their philosophy and vision, *to be* represents the supreme value, diametrically opposed to *to have*, and precisely this leap, from a value system into another, is what interests us in this article. By quoting Marcus Aurelius, "the philosopher emperor", we can deepen the difference between the comprehension levels of the two systems of values, difference that can be directly transposable into existential pragmatics: "From those which always torment you, many are those that you can easily put aside, like some that exist only in your mind. And you will prepare yourself the largest area of freedom, if you embrace the whole world with the thought, if you watch the eternity of time, if you quickly contemplate the transformation of every thing, the shortening of the duration between birth and disappearance, the eternity which was before all, and the eternity which comes after all."<sup>3</sup>

Returning to Fromm, he found, after his research, that: "To *have* and *to be* are two basically-different forms of human living, whose magnitude gives differences, of an

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which haunted his native Germany during the war." In Duane P. Schulz and Sydney Ellen Schulz, *O istorie a psihologiei moderne* (Bucharest: Editura Trei, 2012), 34-35.

<sup>1</sup> Famous figure in Ion Luca Caragiale's play "A lost letter" – a political charade.

<sup>2</sup> Erich Fromm, *Haben oder Sein*, 27.

<sup>3</sup> Marcus Aurel, *Selbstbetrachtungen* (Augsburg: Bechtermünz Verlag, 1997), 131.

individual character, and imprints various social types.”<sup>1</sup> Such analyzes are of course made from the position of a researcher with a keen sociologic sense which also do not lose attention on a psychological view, of an anthropological character, over the general and also essential positioning regarding the human being, as C. G. Boeree mentioned: “Another aspect of his theory is fairly unique to him: his interest in the economic and cultural roots of personality. (...) Your personality is to a considerable extent a reflection of such issues as social class, minority status, education, vocation, religious and philosophical background, and so forth.”<sup>2</sup> And the author continues, as if to highlight again the idea and the cause of the marginalization of Fromm’s theoretical views: “This has been a very under-represented view, perhaps because of its association with Marxism. But it is, I think, inevitable that we begin to consider it more and more, especially as a counterbalance to the increasing influence of biological theories.”<sup>3</sup> Precisely here in the integrative sociological way of the psychoanalytic anthropological vision, Fromm’s vision detaches from the classic approach of his school of origin, as already J.A.C. Brown stated: “All religions, metaphysical systems, or all-inclusive ideologies serve the same fundamental need: to relate man significantly to the universe, to himself, and to his fellow-men. This observation leads Fromm to reverse the opinion of Freud that religion is a form of universal neurosis – on the contrary, he says, neurosis is a form of private religion.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, the generous and broad vision proposed by Fromm in works already appeared before “To Have or to Be” is distinguished, vision that integrates the human being both in his humanity and in his social and physical environment.

### Development of ideas

Fromm criticizes the shift of the emphasis from *to be* on *to have* that is so obvious in contemporary society. But, *to be* is the contrary of *to have*; then when we no longer refer to our possessions (the material ones, but even the aspirations, desires, expectations that *we have*), we can *be*, defined by ourselves and not on the basis of some values, goods, possessions or external cues. The release from the “demon” of possessiveness and consumption can only lead to a detachment from foreignness, grafted on our genuine nature. We know that man is born without any possessions, but then he will be quickly surrounded by them, first of all the necessary possessions appear and they will widely open the doors for the contingent and superfluous ones in a continuously reiterated race with commitment for life. And, in our opinion, there would be nothing wrong with it, if the possessions (already present or projected in the future) would not come surrounded by a “tire” of worries, problems and related dependencies. We note that these attributes are co-constructed or inter-weaved (in an insidious way) in the very substance of possessions and of the things we desire, loading them with an additional “weight”. Representing excessive existential ballast, the dependencies and the implications of possessiveness become true metastases which are overgrown around the contemporary

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<sup>1</sup> Erich Fromm, 27-28.

<sup>2</sup> C. George Boeree, *Personality Theories, Erich Fromm*, accessed on the 14th of March, 2013, at <http://webspace.ship.edu/cgboer/fromm.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> J.A.C. Brown, *Freud and the Post-Freudians* (London: Penguin Books, 1967/1961), 154.

human Ego, hence: “Indeed the liberation of the exterior enslavement is required as – with rare exceptions – it cripples the inner man.”<sup>1</sup> We have to mention here that not the possessed good (or the one that would be possessed) is problematic, but the unexpected implications, strongly branched and insidious, that come with it: the chaining in dependencies (any service we received should be returned, recognized or rewarded), the intricateness in the social collateral or the appetite for contingent connections (i.e., if I have a “cool” house, I must also have a “cool” kitchen that should be continuously updated with the newest creations).

We can see how, continuing our study, the features of possessions (in general) are aligned on at least two major axes: on the one hand, they bring us satisfaction, make us happy and give us the feeling of a certain security, reaching even to become benchmarks for our self-definition, and on the other hand, they require maintenance, cleaning, repairing, or to be moved from one place to another, to be ordered or arranged so that our mind is connected without escape to our “wealth”. On the one hand, we commit our being in order to obtain certain goods and have a series of possessions, and on the other hand, it’s precisely these possessions that involve us in the continuous activity of their augmentation, updating, and maintaining. In other words, our mental system is infected precisely by the objects in which it has invested itself in, is possessed by its own possessions, thrown in immanence, and caught up in the trap of joy of *having* and in the dissatisfaction of not having enough. As Fromm mentioned in his study from 1956: “All activities are subordinated to economic goals, means have become ends; man is an automaton – well fed, well clad, but without any ultimate concern for that which is his peculiarly human quality and function.”<sup>2</sup>

We underline here that, from an etymological point of view the verb “to possess” came to Romanian from Latin, through French connection. The Latin original – *possideo, possidere* – is formed out of *potis or pote* – adj., which is translated as strong, capable, able, possible – coupled with *sedeo* – the first person of the verb *sedere*, to sit, to be seated, but also to stand idle, stand still, to let down, to lower, to remain fixed, to stay still.<sup>3</sup> This short linguistic insight allows us to discern double meanings in interpreting the verb in question. We can notice that it (the verb) also allows the meaning of “being strong or possibly lowered, fixed and/or let down”, i.e., possessed or under the influence of something that is undeniably and powerfully acting upon us. All these come to support, from a linguistic perspective, the pun/wordplay that is allowed by the expressions “to possess” and “to be possessed”, the nouns “owner/possessor” and “possessed” (which is also an adjective) or the verb “to possess” with its active meaning of having, holding or mastering something, etc., and the passive meaning of being ruled, dominated and subjugated.<sup>4</sup> The ambiguity at the linguistic level allows philosophical seasoning most fertile. In the German version of Fromm’s book the term *Einverleibung* – closeness/ incorporation – which, in German, characterizes very well the origin of

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<sup>1</sup> Erich Fromm, *Vom Haben zum Sein, Wege und Irrwege der Selbsterfahrung* (München: Wilhelm Heyne Verlag, 1996), 20.

<sup>2</sup> Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, 122.

<sup>3</sup> *apud* Gheorghe Guțu, *Dicționar latin-român* (Latin-Romanian dictionary, 2<sup>nd</sup>, revised ed. (Bucharest: Editura Humanitas, 2003), 1024, 1028, 1205.

<sup>4</sup> *apud* Noul dicționar universal al limbii române (New universal dictionary of the Romanian language), ed. Ioan Oprea et al. (Chișinău: Editura Litera Internațional, 2006), 1080.

possessiveness – (*der*) *Leib* is the body in which we introduce – *ein* – something in the complete/perfect way – *ver*. The psychoanalyst Fromm sees the origin of *to have* in the act of feeding, as an in-corporation of the elements of the world, found of course at the basis of our existence. As Zygmunt Bauman in his *Liquid Love* puts it: “... (as Erich Fromm suggests, humans of all ages and cultures are confronted with the solution of one and the same question: the question of how to overcome separateness, how to achieve union, how to transcend one’s own individual life and find “at-onement”). All love is tinged with the anthropophagic urge.”<sup>1</sup> Physiological justification at first, the in-corporation quickly becomes the main trend of the being that sees fulfilled by this act not only the maintenance and growth, but also the subsistence or even the psychological development. Going on further in order to find anthropological tangents, Fromm recalls the unusual practice of cannibalism by which people approached, namely incorporated the powers, abilities, intelligence or the cunning of the defeated opponents. Therefore, he could define the following psychological aspects of incorporation: “Consumerism is a form of *to have*, perhaps the most important one in the consumption society. To consume has two aspects. It reduces my fear, because what is consumed cannot be taken from me, but it also forces/obliges me to consume more and more, because what has been consumed does not please/satisfy me for a long time. The contemporary consumer could identify himself/herself with the formula: I am what I have and what I eat.”<sup>2</sup>

There follows (in the quoted work) the analysis, from the perspective of *to have* and *to be*, of some sectors of contemporary life; I shall quote a few: learning, remembering, communication, reading, authority, knowledge and even faith. The finding that emerges from this analysis is that all these sectors/fields can be easily perverted by their falling under the incidence of *to have*. Out of the numerous examples that can be given we mention a few: “*I have* learned English.”, “*I have* a college degree.”, “*I have* read many books.”, “*I have* a strong faith in ...” and so on. All these formulations, as natural, widely accepted and commonly used as they are, can be attributed to the same paradigm of possessiveness. We note that although they are part of the daily use (fact that generally eludes any analysis or opportunity of awareness) these formulations subscribe to our way of thinking, to our system of beliefs, and hence to our way of approaching the surrounding reality and the relationships with the others. Thus, we state that the very cognitive perspective is fuelled and driven by a unanimous way of thinking, feeling and collective attitudes, without being subject to any custom/personalized analysis. The result cannot be anything else but a life driven by external cues, socially validated, and without any serious and profound personal contribution. Submerged to the collective *habitus*, the man meets no invitation to reflection and questioning, to analyze some of the mental stereotypes or the attitudes that animates him/her. Put and placed (lat., *potis, pote + sedere*) in his/her place – full-time conformist – the contemporary human being satisfies himself with the framing that is given to him, he implicitly accepts his place in society.

In this context we can assert that *to have* and *to be* represent two “parallel” universes, each closed in itself, as if they had at their centre a black hole which does not

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<sup>1</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love, On the Frailty of Human Bonds* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Erich Fromm, *Haben oder Sein*, 37.

allow them to emanate and to open towards the other in order to establish contacts or bridges. Within *to have* predominate the material objects and the possessiveness (extended even on creatures, including human beings), and within *to be* the existence of psychical (mental) “objects”, of cultural and/or spiritual values are dominant. We should emphasise that to pass, however (as individuals) from one universe into another, thus from *having* to *being*, a leap is necessary, and this leap should be done over an existential fault. The success of this operation, of this syncope, involves firstly the giving up. In order to make a step forward, one must first detach the foot from the surface or the realm it stands on. Only by leaving something behind, we can move forward and hence the term “syncope” provides the meaning (interruption, pause) of what we support. The giving up that we are talking about is located within the delicate area of our choices, desires and expectations; it refers to our way of life itself, thus to what we usually consider as the most normal thing possible (or, as Peter D. Kramer indicates in his introduction to *The Art of Loving* it can be a total reconsidering of our usual ideas: “For Fromm, love is rebellion against a commercial ideal.”). We leave aside the fact that this “normal”, just because it is so, is not put under any analysis that should demonstrate its internal consistency. Being trivial and obvious, kept in virtue of the unanimity of adhesions, supported by the unilateral collective pressure of tolerance that allows it without questioning, normality is just going on. It is the absolute merit of the German psychoanalyst to have emphasized the social role in the psychological imprinting exerted on individuals, as also Karen Horney mentioned: “Many authors have recognized the importance of social factors as factors that exert a decisive influence on the psychological conditions. Erich Fromm in his article, “Zur Entstehung des Christusdogmas”, *Imago*, vol. 16 (1930), pp. 307-373, was the first who introduced and developed this method of approach in German psychoanalytic literature.”<sup>1</sup>

In our perspective the inherent conception of the field of *having* is equipped with the property of self-sufficiency, it wants to possess and if it has something, it wants to have more, to gather and never to let anything or give up its possessions. It is precisely the effort that is invested in the gathering of possessions that hinders the release from them. That is because we invest our energy, our knowledge or our luck in grabbing the possessions we want. Thus, from simple objects, the possessions become animated (namely energetically charged) by all our concerns and investments that are centered on them, being surrounded by the halo of aspirations, expectations or emotions that we place in them. After all, it is not from the possessed objects that we must free ourselves, but precisely of this emotional halo; we need to divest them of our concerns and of the mental energy that „possessio-centrally” gravitates around them. This is not possible through a smooth transition, which would continue the redundant series of the related mental preoccupation and accumulations, but it takes a leap, a break within a self-stiffed structure which is closed, impenetrable and has deep roots (as it is mentioned in the Gospels: „Wherever your treasure is, there your heart and thoughts will also be.”).

The accumulated possessions become the central point around which we gravitate, they catch us - *captatio* - and turn from being possessed into possessing. Each new possession seems to bring about a change - for the better - but this is just a

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Horney, *Personalitatea nevrotică a epocii noastre* (The neurotic personality of our age) (Bucharest: Editura Univers Enciclopedic Gold, 2010), 24.



continuous (re) adjustment (immersed in a self-closed system) and not a transformation, i.e. a trans-mutation. Everything happens like in the group theory in mathematics where the result of any combination of the elements of a group is also an element of the group; in other words, whatever we do, as many combinations we try, we remain trapped in the same mental area, that is in the same ontological horizon. The desired ones and then the possessed ones will very quickly enter among our many possessions that were once on a list of expectations. The possessions, whether desired or already ignored (the projection in the future or the acquisition in the past), i.e. the whole field/domain of *having*, gain *ontos*, they are woven into our most intimate inner being, grafts which are co-constructed in our existence, defining our individual, family, professional, and most of all, social position.

### Psycho-social aspects

The ubiquity of the universe of *to have* makes it seem right normal; being contiguous to all aspects of life, the world of possessions insinuates itself on all levels (emotional and intellectual) of the contemporary man's feelings. Such universe does not know genuine existential struggles; all intellectual movements that it can produce are rather defined by agitation and by a constant anxiety of the search caused by frustration. In this context we emphasize that the universe of *to have* alienates the man towards himself, transporting him to the state of blueprint on a desire or appetite that would once be achieved (as soon as possible). As such, the individual is thrown into a permanent running – *curriculum vitae*, in the original meaning: race of life – perpetual motion towards an apparently necessary goal, which is never sufficient in itself. The distortive aspect of this race at the individual's level is given by its essentially social determination. The man finds himself in a race which is not really his own. The objects he/she must have, purchase, possess, and so on, are defined as desirable in a collective universe sketched and induced at a social, economic and political level. In other words, the desire to own and especially to multiply the number and/or the quality of the possessed objects are drawn from outside ourselves, by means of mass-media, advertising and marketing. In order to assert and to certify the proper social affiliation and integration (that is determined by a certain historical period, by the geographic placement or by the fashion in vogue) the human individual is pushed, in virtue of a conformism with gregarious substrate, to a consumerism of a specific direction. In this sense Rainer Funk believes that: "Fromm's starting point in *Haben oder Sein* is the observation that the orientation on to have is today a mass phenomenon, which has its basis in economic and social realities of a society that has too much and thus it may fall prey to the temptation to define itself by possessiveness benchmarks."<sup>1</sup> The diversity of objects that can be purchased is becoming larger and larger so we can choose the specialized tier of personal consumption: from food to cosmetics, from books to clothes, from shoes to cars, from cell phones to ... Thus, extra-wide perspectives of choices are opened, our options increasing exponentially with each new product or model appeared on the market. But if it is about making choices, then the perspective of choosing between various

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<sup>1</sup> Rainer Funk, *Nachwort* in Erich Fromm, *Vom Haben zum Sein, Wege und Irrwege der Selbsterfahrung* (München: Wilhelm Heyne Verlag, 1996), 162.

commercial offers presents itself, at a closer look, as being just the tip of the iceberg. The most superficial part of the options lies in products or new models, while the deep part, that concerns me as a self-determined, autonomous and settled individual, comes when I can choose to buy or not, to be concerned with possessions or not. Because, after all, all marketed products and/or those that can be possessed are situated on the same level: the one designated by Fromm with the phrase *to have*. The truly existential and axiological opening is sketched as the possibility of choosing between the world of *to have* and the world of *to be*. Such option, however, implies the leap outside a system of values and stated benchmarks, known and of widespread acceptance towards an unfamiliar land, poorly mapped, with many white spots and numerous questions for the common consciousness.

### Philosophical reflections

We can depict the idea that *to have* is under the index of immanence; while *to be* represents the transcendence. Only within the transcendence of *to be* comes something else that is not part of the usual universe of life (because it is neglected or ignored by our own education and socialization, be it primary, secondary or tertiary<sup>1</sup>). *To be* implies an existential discontent, a restlessness of the being under construction and development, which does not let itself confiscated by the permanent stasis of self-sufficiency. The one who placed oneself in *being mode* must continually reinvent oneself; moreover, he/she precisely has this existential need. But, in order to do so, he/she must be empty (or emptied) of things, of the world, of God (as a usual broad concept, implemented by a religion) and even of himself/herself, as also Herman Kügler emphasised in his essay on Fromm: “In the end, to feel good means that the individual is and he perceives himself in *existence* and not in what he *has* or wants.”<sup>2</sup> He/she must become “poor”, “possessions-less” in the sense of liberating himself/herself of the attachments and dependencies that the possessions bring along: “The man, who must have this poverty, must live in such a way as he/she does not live for himself, nor for the truth, or for God.”<sup>3</sup>

So, ultimately, the emptying of the attachment to material goods is only a prerequisite for other waivers. This requires a serious leap from a universe that is very clearly circumscribed in the social by our collective views/conceptions. It is like the transition from the members of a class to the class itself, located on a higher logical level. The new level touched by such an understanding of the world and of life circumstances implicitly leaves behind the previous stage (the area of *to have* in our case) in order to strongly anchor in the world of internal values, analyzed, judged and re-judged by our thinking and consciousness. From this new existential perspective and epistemological settlement, the combinatorics of the class members continues to exist, but having a totally different axiological frame. More specifically, it sees itself devalued, because the investment now goes to another sphere, represented in our example by the

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<sup>1</sup> *apud* Zeno Gozo, *Între tradițional și contemporan în sociologia educației* (Between tradition and contemporaneity in the sociology of education) (Timișoara: Editura Artpress, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Hermann Kügler, *Die Kunst, menschlich zu leben, Wichtige Aspekte der Selbstverwirklichung nach Erich Fromm*, in *Ganz und heil, Unterschiedliche Wege zur »Selbstverwirklichung«*, ed. Karl Frielingsdorf and Medard Kehl (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1990), 53.

<sup>3</sup> Meister Eckhart, quoted in Erich Fromm, *Haben oder Sein*, 66.

class itself. The class, representing an entirely different level than its members, can be compared to the field of *to be* located on a logical level superior to the one represented by *to have*. The last term (in question) is now included in the first, recorded somewhere in its structures, put in its places and transformed through a permeable but highly selective assimilation. The switching from the class members to the class itself represents a remarkable jump of level that allows the change of the perspective on things that is done precisely from the inside of the new conquered position.

If the teleology of *to have* is continually directed toward the object (understood here as any thing external to the subject), the teleological of *to be* aims at the subject, recurved on itself, placed in a permanent circumambulation and deepening of one's own being and of its existential aspects; centrifugal movement in one case, centripetal in the other; self-distancing with the risk of wandering in the first case, closeness with the chance of re-finding in the second. In other words, *to be* leads to the re-settlement in a personal source, to the repositioning of the individual in what is characteristic for him/her, to the re-bringing of the particular being on the strong and firm ground of the Being. If we want to use an Aristotelian term *par excellence*, we can talk in this context about the achievement of one's own *entelechy*. For the circumscribed territory of *to be* creates its own *dynamys* (gr., power, possibility at Aristotle) that seeks its authentic centre which stands under the same name and has the same direction: *to be*. This achievement, whose aim or purpose is itself, is very securely attached to the term *entelechia* forged by Aristotle, that being the principle, the possibility and/or the direction of fulfilment of something. The entelechy, as the form expressed in/through the matter is the soul that animates a body; the transition from *to have* to *to be* is done through a motion from the material to the psychological, from body to soul, from nature to culture. As transposition of a potency – *dynamis* – in act and even in life and/or its orientation, the entelechy of *to be* comes to fulfil an expectation that the human soul has to itself, to its potentials and possibilities, because, as Fromm mentioned in *Escape from Freedom*: "These potentialities are present in everybody; they become real only to the extent to which they are expressed. In other words, *positive freedom consists in the spontaneous activity of the total, integrated personality*."<sup>1</sup> All these reflections draw a certain existential path that seems very clear at first sight: the path leads from *to have* to *to be*, from *Haben* to *Sein*, from possessions to the being, from the focus on the objects to the focus on our own being. From a psychological, social or ontogenetic point of view things seem clear: first, *to have*, and then *to be*. Even the direction drawn by Fromm in his famous work follows the same path: "Only to the extent that we demolish the mode of existence of *to have*, i.e. of the non-existence (which means the ending of the search for security and identity by binding ourselves to what we have, to the fact that we possess, that we are connected to our Ego and to our goods), the mode of existence of *to be* may enter. In order to "be" we should hand over the egocentrism and the self-love namely to become "poor" and "emptied", as the mystics often express."<sup>2</sup>

But from a philosophical point of view all these perspectives are reversed because otherwise it would seem that we are putting the cart before the horse. *To be* represents in fact the potential, the substrate or the sub-stance (etymologically) on which any item from the domain of possessions can graft or find its place. *To be* creates, after

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<sup>1</sup> Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 1994/1941), 257.

<sup>2</sup> Erich Fromm, *Haben oder Sein*, 89.

all, the condition of the possibility of *to have*. Without this basis or foundation, without “existing”, no need to own or incorporate something could be possible. For *to have*, someone who can perform an action must first exist. In other words, before a predicate we must put a subject - not only as part of the sentence, but also as a support of an action. It is precisely here where the huge opening, with which the domain of *to be* comes and manifests, lies. Hence its importance; and the fact that this basis exists in the most natural way makes it gain the least attention. Everything that comes as granted risks being ignored with the greatest ease and serenity. Moreover, everything that is ignored simply does not exist, not even as a concern for the reflective intellect.

We must not give up *to have* – which is, anyway, impossible, because, whatever I give up, I cannot give up myself – or the little dependencies that this way of life brings, but we must reach the entelechy of our being, as the subject from which wraps and unravels endlessly the spiral of consumerism of any kind: necessary or contingent, stringent or superfluous. In other words, if from Fromm's book, namely “... that *to become*, *activity* and *movement* are *elements of to be*”<sup>1</sup> it results that *to be* is assimilated with *to become*, I think that the observation becomes pertinent that the first term refers to the present (continuous), while the second sends very clearly towards the future. *To become* does not necessarily mean *to re-come* namely to return to yourself, to the origin of the genuine being. *To become* involves a journey, an itinerary with a goal that easily reaches for “more” or for “better”. And from here to the entry in the race (*curriculum*) of accumulations (qualitative this time), there's only one step. From this perspective, the overlapping of meaning of the terms *to be* and *to become* – as it was presented by Fromm – proves to be confusing and lacks the depth of analysis and comprehension. The concept of *to be* should not come with a dynamic of the growth, development, expansion or improvement (implied by *to become*). The state of *to be* is achieved not so much by progression, but by the (re) settlement in the original, in what genuinely is (and always was). It all refers to an inner attitude, to the ability of awaiting in the middle of our own being, to the capacity to operate starting from internal values, filtered by a deep judgment, to a *modus vivendi* low in existential struggles. Such lifestyle (way of life) eludes the area of questions and of uncertainties (features of *to have*, but especially of *to become*). The solid placement in the way of *to be* does not put questions that it cannot answer, because it knows that the answers or the solutions come by themselves - since they are needed (especially since they are always within the collective unconscious that Carl G. Jung spoke about). I believe that these statements are necessary in order to tie and to fix the nuances of some terms that were overlapped by Fromm. From a sociological and psychological (psychoanalytical) point of view the joining of *to be* with *to become* is not at all problematic; on the contrary, precisely this super-positioning allows the development of the dimensions and nuances invoked by the author. But what is normal and pertinent at the level of some humanity sciences is not necessarily transposable in philosophical analysis. Certain meanings can be overturned or misinterpreted from the moment when we start from etymology and the reflection bent on the original and on the substrate.

Among the modalities of *to be*, Fromm emphasizes especially the activity and makes a careful analysis of the opposition between this and passivity, and of their

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<sup>1</sup> Erich Fromm, *Haben oder Sein*, 36.

valences. The premises of the existential modality of *to be* are: the independence, the freedom and the critical thinking. Besides these important aspects, as Fromm mentioned in *Man for Himself*: “There is no innate “drive for progress” in man; it is the contradiction in his existence that makes him proceed on the way he set out.”<sup>1</sup> The manifestation field of those “drives” is the activity in its sense of personal construction, of self-development and self-fulfilment, namely of self-realization. What we underlined in the preceding paragraph tends to a rather internal understanding of the realization of *to be*, understood as a bending of the spirit on itself. The importance of this fact can be seen at some of the prominent authors of the history of philosophy.

Aristotle already put in the front of all activities the contemplative one, realized in the search of truth and wisdom, so *philo-sophia*. This is also the activity of the *nous*, the coordinator spirit of the world at Anaxagora. Thomas Aquinas understands, by *vita contemplativa*, an interior tranquillity (detached from the worldly) oriented towards spiritual knowledge. And at Spinoza it is about the realization of the human nature to which our freedom and our *eudemonia* (happiness) depends. Democritus stated about the *eudemonia* that it does not consist in the external assets, and for the Stoics happiness is the result of a harmonious life. But by analyzing the etymology of the word *eudaimonia*, we notice the particle “*eu*” referring to good, right (as in *eugenie*) and *daimon* (whose voice Socrates listened to) the inner voice that nowadays we refer to it as “intuition”. So *eudaimonia* would be the good intuition, whose obedience would lead to happiness (at least from the perspective of ancient, medieval or modern authors). The voice of this good *daimon* is the voice of the Being that speaks to us in order to guide us towards our true nature, towards *to be* and more specifically, towards *being* ourselves. But, regarding these “*discussions with the daimon*”, for Socrates too it was very clear that this is not and cannot be confused with his Ego! This inner voice (intuition) comes from the realm of the Being, the basis and foundation of our life and our becoming. And precisely to this basis we need to relate actively and fully involved (body and soul) if we choose the being mode. For, as specified by Karl Jaspers, philosophy is a constant “concern for ourselves” or, in other words: “The world looks unfathomable. But the man finds in himself what he does not find anywhere else in the world, something unknowable, unprovable, never objectual, something that avoids any scientific investigation: the freedom and everything related to it.”<sup>2</sup>

Following these few clarifications we can distinguish two main axes of the domains in question (*to have* and *to be*) which we see as being very clearly and strongly differentiated from a teleological point of view. Both have as hypostasis a *telos*: the aim of the circumscribed area of *to have* is oriented towards the object (objectual), material, quantitative and tangible, widely socially accepted, driven and validated by the media, the economy and politics. Left from the collective, envisioned by the social, the purpose of *to have* re-curves itself, in order to (re-)turn in the emerging area: the consumerist tendency. From this perspective, the fulfilment of the individual as such is eminently second or, to say it more oppressively, secondary; satisfaction comes *a posteriori*. The individual is only an inflection point on a loop, a node of an intricate and extremely

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<sup>1</sup> Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself, An inquiry into the psychology of ethics* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2003/1947), 29.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Der philosophische Glaube* (Zürich: Artemis-Verlag, 1948), 57.

complicated network that includes him, along with many other individuals. The society, economy or politics can very easily dispense with a particular individual, with a certain consumer without suffering losses – in any second other willing buyers will be found. The individual as such does not even exist (for the system), he is not taken into account in his individuality and strict personality (being significant only statistically); he sees himself considered only from the perspective of one who consumes – potential eager or buyer indebted (financially, emotionally or socially) to the system for everything it (the system) can offer. Such functionality makes that individuals be interchangeable, small rollers, which can always fail, located in a huge gear equipped with numerous spare parts. The individual's value in the world of *having* can be measured very precisely in terms of *input* and *output* or to say it more clearly, on the pay (salary) slip and in the daily basket. In conclusion we can say that the reiteration of the consumerist determinism is done in a systemic way, by respecting and applying its rules. Individuals, although components of the system, can only obey the laws dictated by its operating mode. Even if the individuals represent the structural bases or the bricks from which the system is built, they are absorbed in the over-structural hierarchy of the system laws and its operation mode.

On the other hand, *the telos* of the cutting/carving represented by the paradigm of *to be* is oriented toward the subjective and the qualitative, both difficult to count or to measure with quantifiable scales (clearly-defined and circumscribed). Personal development, self-realization and fulfilment, the relentless overcome of the limitations and shortcomings are values of internal nature for which we cannot have objective evaluation criteria, precisely because they occur at a subtle and insidious level. This does not mean at all that they do not represent important forces in making changes of substance. This, obviously only at the internal levels of the being, although it takes place in an area hidden from the social, it will also flow out through a major attitudinal change. The man who passed in the register of *to be* will represent by himself a milestone on a long and marking free road, paved with everything that can be possessed. Because the world of *to be* represents both the beginning or the origin (the *a priori*) and the end or the purpose of human existence. From this perspective, the pleading for the internalization (and then implicitly the exteriorization) of the existential domain values – *to be* – would be understood as an argument of humanizing the human.

As the world of *to have* may seem inexhaustible and continuously extendable, the same happens with the field of *to be*. The existential adventure and the (re) settlement in one's self allows a continuous development, supported by a relentless deepening. The dislocation of the landmarks of *to have* will implicitly lead to the relocation of the centre of gravity on the internal values of *to be*. Precisely here is where the subtle approach of moving from one paradigm to another, shows itself: *to be* does not necessarily mean a growing or a development of something, but a very clear renunciation to the implications, connections, dependencies and concepts of the horizon of *to have*.

## Conclusions

We showed, in the lines above, that the paradigm of *to have* has an indisputable axiomatic authority, making it invulnerable and creator of a mental universe that is well and solidly mapped. The map that stands at its basis is invisible and thus invulnerable; it

does not allow very easily the trip to another ontological continent (except with huge difficulties accompanied by disagreement from others). The paradigms of *to have* and of *to be*, are untranslatable, because the two worlds speak different languages which are self-sufficient. Therefore, there cannot be a smooth transition between them, a result of quantitative accumulations. The two worlds are separated by a gnoseological, axiological and ethical hiatus. The values are simply not transposable from the one to the other. But as the world of *to have* is based precisely on accumulations, these generate a sense of (objective) reality which quickly structures becoming closed into itself. The switching to the other universe (that of *to be*) is done just over an existential fault – thus by adopting a different perspective/view on things. Only the cracks, the erosions or the corrosions of the first “universe” can force the individual to see the paradigm that possesses him/her, and to make the ontic step to another reality. Between the two areas (paradigms) there is a hiatus, a vacuum epitomized by anguish. In order to realize the transition, the man must free oneself of two anxieties. First of all, it is the anxiety of ending the attachment to “my” objects; followed by the anguish of the emptiness that this waiver creates, gap that is opened towards the nothingness of our own being: “what shall I do?” In this vacuum of the being we must resist, in this area stasis is required. Through this stop, the man has the opportunity to make a “mourning” for the lost things, because only the giving up and the renouncing to the inherent attachments can release our spirit in order to move forward. The values gathered so far must vanish from the mental horizon in order to first leave it empty, so that starting from this state, another horizon of knowledge to be built. This new knowledge will then be translated into life, thus becoming ontological.