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The Forgotten Language of Nontheistic Mysticism: Religious Factors in Erich Fromm's Humanism

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Abstract: In *You Shall Be as Gods*, Erich Fromm (1900–1980) defines his position as nontheistic mysticism. This research clarifies the term, considers its importance within Fromm's humanism, and explores its potential origins. The nontheistic mystical position plays a central role in Fromm's understanding of the relationship between mysticism and organized religion, religion and religiosity, and it clarifies the relationship between religion, philosophy, and social psychoanalysis, whose combination constitutes his humanistic ethics. Nontheistic mysticism relates, as well, to Fromm's understanding of human nature; it involves the question of the relationship between language, perception, and experience. The nontheistic mystical position is linked to Fromm's negative theology, the x experience, and idolatry. Hence, the nontheistic mystical position is relevant to Fromm's understanding of self-realization and his vision of a sane society. Unlike some scholarly opinion, the conclusions of this paper suggest that Fromm's humanism is not radical, as long as radical is defined as an absolute atheistic secular feature that eliminates the range of religious language and experience. Rather, it is a broad and cautious humanism that, on the one hand, internalizes the transcendent divinity into the human subject and transforms it into anthropological–ethical phenomena, but, on the other, implies that atheism carries the risk of an idolatrous identification of the human being with God. Consequently, this humanism requires a religious–mystical component to adequately portray the spiritual and ethical potentials of humanity and its challenges. Nontheistic mysticism is a consciousness mechanism aimed at the fine-tuning of the individual's moral compass, which is affected by the pathologies of normalcy that prevail in all societies.



Citation: Pinkas, Ronen. 2024. The Forgotten Language of Nontheistic Mysticism: Religious Factors in Erich Fromm's Humanism. *Religions* 15: 531. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15050531>

Academic Editor: Malachi Hacohen

Received: 26 March 2024

Revised: 21 April 2024

Accepted: 22 April 2024

Published: 25 April 2024



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Keywords: mysticism; x experience; idolatry; ideology; negative theology; religious humanism; nontheistic Jewish humanism; Fritz Mauthner

1. Experiencing the Reality beyond God

In *You Shall be as Gods* (published in 1966), Fromm states, “‘God’ is one of many different poetic expressions of the highest value in humanism, not a reality in itself. It is unavoidable, however, that in talking about the thought of a monotheistic system I use the word ‘God’ often, and it would be awkward to add my own qualification each time. Hence, I wish to make my position clear at the outset. If I could define my position approximately, I would call it that of a nontheistic mysticism” (Fromm [1966] 1969, p. 18).

Fromm's writing is commonly described as clear, well-organized, and accessible to a broad audience, rather than solely for scholars. His bestsellers, *Escape from Freedom*, *To Have or to Be?* and, especially, *The Art of Loving*, continue to be sold in bookstores today owing to their ability to mediate complex issues in clear language that an ordinary educated reader can grasp. However, the term *nontheistic mysticism* is ambiguous and difficult to understand, and its application deviates from the clarity that characterizes Fromm's style.¹ First, mysticism is a vague concept that is hard to define. As Scholem writes, “There are almost as many definitions of the term as there are writers on the subject” (Scholem [1941] 1995, pp. 3–4). Second, the common definitions of mysticism frequently include a theistic component, most often as an unmediated encounter of the individual with God,

and the idea that the mystic is bound to a certain religion whose principles constitute his fundamental presumptions.² Hence, it is not surprising that Fromm rarely uses this challenging term in this particular form in his writings. Nonetheless, the nontheistic mystical position, as Fromm defines it, can be found in his writings, even if he did not employ the term explicitly.

If Fromm's thought had not been so abundantly saturated with theological terms such as negative theology, idolatry, Messianism and religion, and with so many references to the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, Jewish and Christian mystical writings, Hasidism, and Buddhism, and, most importantly, if Fromm had not insisted that religion (humanistic and nontheistic) was so important³ for a successful human existence and self-realization,⁴ then it might have been possible to dismiss Fromm's statement as incidental and solely dependent on a narrow context.⁵

We could then contend that Fromm's nontheistic mysticism should be understood solely in the context of the historical development in the concept of God: from the belief in or the experience of a concrete and local God that, according to Fromm, indicates a childish attachment pattern of worship (as in archaic forms of devotion such as polytheism, totemism, matriarchal religions of nature, etc.) to a more mature monotheistic structure, which directs to an abstract God and a universal view (by highlighting negative theology as the real knowledge of God) and the negation of idolatry (as the desired religious action). Finally, this ends in a complete liberation from any theistic or nontheistic religious system, and a transition to an anthropological system of spiritual orientation that endorses the powers of reason and love (Fromm [1950] 1955, pp. 29–31, 49; Fromm 1994, p. 160; Fromm [1975] 1999a, pp. 34–36; Fromm [1956] 2006, pp. 59–66; Fromm [1968] 2010, p. 74). He writes that for “the non-theistic humanist” a question arises: “What could take the place of religion in a world in which the concept of God may be dead but in which the experiential reality behind it must live?” (Fromm [1966] 1969, p. 180).

Accordingly, we can assume that *nontheistic* refers to a kind of humanistic frame of orientation: namely, the ethical–spiritual principles that are found in world religions and should be freed from their particularistic symbolic traditional–religious language, and especially from their irrational (metaphysical) authoritarian elements. In *You Shall be as Gods*, Fromm does indeed replace the theistic term *God* with the term *x element* (Fromm [1966] 1969, pp. 19, 44),⁶ whereas *mysticism* refers to the personal experience that makes this frame of orientation necessary, concrete and therefore binding. Thus, Fromm believes that it is possible and necessary to break free from the common traditional religious framework and to embrace a kind of private–universal religiousness without losing the former's spiritual and moral depth.⁷ This freedom is not about recognition and a rational acceptance of a new system of orientation, but about experiencing the “reality behind” the concept of God. The *x* experience (discussed later) implies the transition from addressing religion to focusing on religiosity.⁸ In his lecture “The Relevance of Humanity for Today” given in 1962, Fromm speaks of “a new experience of humanism” and the “one world” that is related to it. He warns that “unless we develop a new humanism, there will be no *one world*” (Fromm 1994, p. 62). The *one world* means a universal view of equality between all human beings despite their differences (i.e., every human being has the potential to develop the powers of love and reason, transcending the narrowness of one's ego, and affirming life). He highlights the need for the experience of humanistic values and not merely their recognition and acknowledgment. This experience, he argues, belongs to the “psycho-spiritual field” that is common to the theistic and the non-theistic person (Fromm 1994, p. 56). In my opinion, the notion of experiencing the *one world* originates from Fromm's understanding of mysticism and his interpretation of the path towards the *unio mystica*.⁹ Namely, the *oneness* of the theistic (i.e., “likeness to God”) or nontheistic (i.e., Brahman in Hinduism and satori in Zen Buddhism; see Fromm [1960] 1986, p. 74) mystical experience, and not the philosophical theoretical understanding of universalism or monism, is the foundation of the individual's experience of the new humanism.¹⁰

In a lecture given in 1975, Fromm argues that “radical humanism is not simply a case of rational argumentation, on the contrary this rational argumentation is based on what the individual experiences” (Fromm [1975] 1999a, pp. 34–36). However, this is not a solipsistic Cartesian experience. According to Fromm’s social approach, every experience has a cultural starting point. Just as the mystical experience grows out of the linguistic and conceptual soil of a specific religious tradition, so does the experience of the humanist. He argues that the new humanism is based on the crucial renewal of “the very roots of our tradition, which is the Greek–Roman, Judeo-Christian tradition of Humanism” (Fromm 1994, p. 79).¹¹ Arguably, Fromm’s presentation of the Rabbinic–Hasidic conception of God differs from the common biblical understanding within the Judeo-Christian tradition (discussed later).

Fromm believed that forming and supporting a moral worldview (i.e., productive biophilic orientation) requires more than mere rational knowledge (e.g., knowledge of moral autonomy, human dignity and universalism). He clarifies that the experience of humanism implicates becoming aware “as an active inner process” and not “the passive processes of thinking, listening, agreeing, or contradiction” (Fromm 1994, p. 54). In “Medicine and the Ethical Problem of Modern Man”, he asserts that the definition of ethics as “was meant by the term in the great philosophical or religious tradition [...] is a matter of conscience” (Fromm 1966, pp. 175–94).¹² He states that the ethical humanistic consciousness, as opposed to authoritarian consciousness, is “an inner voice that calls us to return to ourselves” (Fromm 1966, p. 177). For Fromm, listening to the “inner voice” does not refer to hearing the “internalized authority” (i.e., Freud’s superego) or a call for the individualist ethic, which carries the risk of relativism and perhaps anarchism, but rather it involves the hard task of self-introspection of one’s feelings and thoughts combined with the voice of the cultural ethical norms.¹³ This can be seen as a challenging, meditative and perhaps even mystical task.¹⁴

2. Love and Knowledge

Fromm declares in an interview that any attempt to understand the human being must include “knowledge of his biological instinctive equipment as well as of the social influences of his society, and of the religious, moral, and ethical problems with which he must cope. If one omits any of these, one has a crippled and restricted picture of man” (Evans 1966, p. 100). Rainer Funk’s studies highlight the centrality of religious critique in Fromm’s humanism (Funk 1982, pp. 183–218). In *On the Limitations and Dangers of Psychology* (published in 1959), Fromm explicitly expresses his view on the connection between psychology and religious–mystical thought:

“The problem of knowing man is parallel to the theological problem of knowing God. Negative theology postulates that I cannot make any positive statement about God. The only knowledge of God is what He is not. As Maimonides put it, the more I know about what God is not, the more I know about God. Or as Meister Eckhart put it: ‘Meanwhile man cannot know what God is even though he be ever so well aware of what God is not.’ One consequence of such negative theology is mysticism. If I can have no full knowledge of God in thought, if theology is at best negative, the positive knowledge of God can be achieved only in the act of union with God”. (Fromm 1966, p. 203; a similar wording in Fromm [1956] 2006, pp. 29–30)

The comparison between the ability to know God and the ability to know a human being is striking.¹⁵ Fromm’s negative theology implies that the experience of God is the source of our concept of God. He acknowledges that the realm of experiencing God belongs to mysticism. In mysticism, the attempt to know God by thought is replaced by the experience of union with God, in which there is no more room, and no need, for knowledge about God (Fromm [1956] 2006, p. 30; Fromm [1966] 1969, pp. 32–34). In the context of Eckhart’s mysticism, Fromm states, “negative theology does in no way deny the being of God; it only denies our capacity to know *what* he is, but not our faith *that* he is” (Fromm

1994, p. 118; italics in the original). If knowing a person is equivalent to this experience, which is fundamentally conditioned by the negation of attributes and concepts, this might raise the question of whether it is possible to know a person at all. Indeed, there is a parallel between Fromm's description of the mystical experience and the process of discovering the unconscious.¹⁶ Thus, Fromm differentiates between the Aristotelian Greek concept of knowledge as used in the natural sciences, which is impersonal and objective, and the Hebrew concept of knowledge when applied to knowing a person (*yada*, "to know", which in the Hebrew Bible refers to both sexual love and deep understanding, in Genesis 4: 1 and Exodus 2: 23–25).¹⁷ This implies that, according to Fromm, knowing a person is possible only through the intimate experience of the encounter, and in an authentic encounter, a certain *union* needs to be established, namely, love. Fromm concludes: "as the logical consequence of theology is mysticism, so the ultimate consequence of psychology is love" (Fromm [1956] 2006, p. 30).

Given this, Fromm's definition of the human condition—that is, paradox as defining human nature¹⁸ and mysticism as a way of representing what is beyond the rational—and his approach to interpersonal relationships—that is, unity and love as a way of knowing a person—are closely associated with his views on religion and mysticism, specifically his nontheistic mysticism.¹⁹ This illustrates, to a certain extent and despite some elemental differences, that for Fromm, similarly to other Jewish thinkers (such as Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, and Emmanuel Levinas),²⁰ the relationship between God and the human being performs as a model for relationships between humans.

3. Mysticism and the x Experience

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, certain philosophical, psychological, and sociological perspectives emerged that implied that it is possible to distinguish between the institutional and external elements of different religions and the internal mental experiences of the individuals who reported having religious experiences (e.g., William James, Rudolf Otto, Georg Simmel, Friedrich Heiler, Carl Jung, and Martin Buber). The underlying presumption was that all religious–mystical traditions shared an experiential component that involved the establishment of a relationship with the internal or transcendent *absolute* (the metaphysical reality, the unconditioned, the pure consciousness, the One, and the transcendent) that exists beyond the senses and rational thought. In addition, there was the fascination with Far Eastern traditions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Zen Buddhism, which in the West were perceived as religions that focus on the individual's inner experience. Different models were built to examine the mystical experience.²¹

Similar to that of Martin Buber, Fromm's examination of mysticism continues the scholarly trend that views the mystical experience as the expression of the absolute fulfillment of religiosity, but not of religion. Accordingly, the mystical experience can be characterized as a psychological, but not social, category, and can be described without religious terms (concerning Buber's mysticism, see Mendes-Flohr 1989, pp. 78–82). Fromm accepts the assumption that there is no contradiction between theistic (Jewish, Christian, or Muslim) mysticism and non-theistic (Zen Buddhism) mysticism, and mystics are essentially not theistic.²² Namely, the mystics in the West and the East carried the same anti-authoritarian humanist spirit. Fromm intends to clarify the phenomena from his own humanistic perspective rather than from the viewpoint of religious studies or the traditional historic–philological study of mystical texts. Thus, his conception of mysticism is different from what is commonly accepted in research.²³ He holds that mystical writings first and foremost demonstrate an ethical, existential, and non-dogmatic position. Mysticism, Fromm claims, is the highest rational development in religious thinking.²⁴ It refers to the experience of unity, harmony within oneself, with the fellowman, and with the universe (Fromm [1950] 1955, p. 95; Fromm [1966] 1969, p. 178). The experience of unity transcends words and thought. It cannot be fully described in words.²⁵

This kind of unity comprises both the awareness of one's self as a separate and unique entity and "the longing to break through the confines of this individual organization and to

be one with the All" (Fromm [1950] 1955, p. 95). Fromm argues that the tension between these two opposing feelings—the fullest experience of individuality and of its opposite (the general *one* within which individuality is lost)—is the foundation of the mystical experience.²⁶

The mystical experience, according to Fromm, is not ecstatic, numinous, ascetical or cosmological; rather, its meaning is limited to morality and ethics. Joan Braune convincingly demonstrates that, despite the logic of paradox that characterizes Fromm's dialectic approach, it is incorrect to categorize it as gnostic, ecstatic-cathartic or, even worse, apocalyptic (Braune 2014, pp. 182–84). Lundgren states, "In [Fromm's] mysticism there is a shift from dogmatics to ethics, from believing to experiencing, from having to being" (Lundgren 1988, p. 64). The mystics, according to Fromm, "have been deeply imbued with the experience of man's strength, his likeness to God, and with the idea that God needs man as much as man needs God; they have understood the sentence that man is created in the image of God to mean the fundamental identity of God and man. Not fear and submission but love and the assertion of one's own powers are the basis of mystical experience. *God is not a symbol of power over man but of man's own powers*" (Fromm [1950] 1955, p. 49). This is strongly expressed in Fromm's claim that "Marx's atheism is the most advanced form of rational mysticism, closer to Meister Eckhart or to Zen Buddhism than are most of those fighters for God and religion who accuse him of 'godlessness'" (Fromm [1961] 2004, p. 52).²⁷

Fromm distinguishes between a mature and conscious aspiration for unity, which is a mystical harmonious experience that accomplishes the need for relatedness, and a "narcissistic type of mystical experience", which is a regression to a pregenital or prenatal stage of unity (before any sense of individuality or self has developed), and was misunderstood by Freud as the "Oceanic feeling" (Fromm 1992, p. 79). The distinction between the two types of mystical experiences, the narcissistic and the harmonious, can be seen as Fromm's version of the philosophical ethical criticism of solipsistic mysticism, and echoes, for example, Franz Rosenzweig's "dangers of the mystic" in *The Star of Redemption*.²⁸ Fromm expands the narcissistic danger to the social realm. He maintains that individual narcissism can be transformed into group narcissism (Fromm [1964] 1971a, p. 87; also see his discussion about the ambiguity between narcissistic and anti-narcissistic functions in religion, *ibid.*, pp. 81, 98–100). He states that "the essential teachings of all the great humanist religions can be summarized in one sentence: It is the goal of man to overcome one's narcissism" (*ibid.*, pp. 108–9). In this context, Fromm interprets the verse "Love thy neighbor as thyself" as a religious teaching to overcome one's narcissism, similar to Hermann Cohen's idea that one discovers his own human being in the stranger (*ibid.*, p. 109).

In *You Shall be as Gods*, Fromm explicitly connects the ethical-mystical religious experience with the *x* experience. He states that the analysis of the *x* experience moves from the theological to the psychological level. The *x* experience is characterized by the decline of narcissism and necrophilic tendencies, openness to the world, transcending the ego, and the ability to love the world and to distinguish between rational and irrational authority, and between an idea and an ideology (Fromm [1966] 1969, p. 49).²⁹ Fromm binds the mystical-religious experience to the *x* experience for a few reasons. The first is to illustrate the common essence underlying the different traditions: "This type of experience is most clearly expressed in Christian, Moslem, and Jewish Mysticism, as well as in Zen Buddhism. [...] One can speak of a *theistic as well as nontheistic religious experience*" (Fromm [1966] 1969, p. 47).³⁰ Second, this connection determines the concept and function of religion in the humanistic sense (Funk 1982, p. 115). That is, religious concepts acquire their humanistic importance when they are interpreted and lived from the perspective of the *x* experience. And lastly, it illustrates that the common person may achieve a mystical experience if it is characterized as an *x* experience. Namely, the *x* experience is the religious experience of a nontheistic religion. The *x* experience forms a general orientation that leads to ethical action. Thus, the mysticism offered by Fromm is "positive" and "normal mysticism". By positive, it means that the experience does not involve a denial of the world through asceticism—namely, that the world is an illusion that the human being must deny in order

to reach the truth—but rather involves a connection of the human being with the world as part of a “mystical union”.³¹ This mysticism can be called “normal” because it is not limited to those with a special spiritual gift but can be experienced by the ordinary person as well.³²

Fromm believed that the x experience is not only a path to a more humanistic society (overcoming incestuous ties, narcissism and necrophilia, in order to experience freedom, love and biophilia), but also a means for the secular person to engage in the religious discourse (by the exposure of his idols and the discovery of his own religiosity) and for the common religious person to psychologically analyze his irrational and dogmatic faith.³³ He writes that “Eckhart is usually unconscious of his nontheism; Marx, of his religiosity” (Fromm [1976] 2008, p. 133). The x experience is how a believer or a non-believer can experience the reality of absolute values, which are beyond God, and live according to them. This forms the phenomenological basis of Fromm’s belief that humanity can practically unite in the negation of idols and idolatry (Fromm [1955] 1991, p. 343; Fromm [1966] 1969, p. 49).

4. Idolatry and Religion

Fromm sees idolatry as a problem of orientation and the fundamental cause of human suffering. His widespread use of the terms idols and idolatry demonstrates the complexity of the religious terminology in his thought, in general, and the influence of Jewish thought, in particular. Idolatry, which Fromm identifies as a modern problem equivalent to narcissism, alienation, and necrophilia, links the teachings of the biblical prophets to Marx’s social criticism and Freud’s psychoanalysis (the Oedipal complex and incestuous relationships, which Fromm extends to the collective sphere). For Fromm, the fight against idolatry is a fight for human freedom and a sane society. He writes, “Although there is no place for theology, I suggest that there is a place and a need for ‘idology’. The ‘science of idols’” (Fromm [1966] 1969, p. 40; Fromm 1992, p. 43). Namely, idolatry for Fromm is not a theological concept, yet it is impossible to disregard its theological foundation. Overcoming idolatry in its various forms is a crucial element in the formation of a productive orientation. In my opinion, idolatry (or, rather, the fight against idolatry) should be seen as an intermediate concept that bridges the theistic and nontheistic traditions and, in general, the various fields of religion, philosophy, history, psychology and social criticism. In other words, in Fromm’s use, idolatry is an a priori concept external to each of these disciplines and, hence, a key concept in his thought in general.³⁴

Within theistic religion, any fixed formulation and any form of God (as well as the word God itself) are already idols that carry the risk of “religious” idolatry.³⁵ Thus, Fromm holds that in Maimonides’ negative theology as well as in mysticism (i.e., Eckhart), “we find the same revolutionary spirit of freedom” (Fromm [1966] 1969, p. 50)—a freedom in which the human being is the only one responsible for his fate.³⁶

What interests us is the way humanistic religiosity (God as the x element) associates with human freedom. Fromm writes, “He [man] *needs to be obedient to God* so that he can break his fixation to the primary ties and not submit to man. But is the concept of man’s freedom carried to the ultimate consequence of his freedom from God? In general, this is undoubtedly not the case” (Fromm [1966] 1969, p. 62, my emphasis).³⁷

Todd Dubose contends that human freedom occurs in relation to God as the x experience (Dubose 2000, p. 222). In Fromm’s dialectic, God is a condition for human freedom, which includes independence from a specific form, but not from the broad meaning, of the condition itself. He states, “I am disobedient to the idol because I am obedient to God” (Fromm 1966, p. 167). The concept of God functions as an insightful reminder of the risks associated with “submissions”.³⁸ In the social realm, this refers to submission to a heteronomous authority (fixation to primary ties: family, clan, party, nation); in the inner realm, this refers to submission to greed and selfishness (the *having* orientation; see Fromm [1976] 2008, pp. 16–17). Both of these realms represent determinations that must be overcome, and *obedience* to God (the x element that represents the human being’s highest potential) is essential for this accomplishment.³⁹ Although the concept of God is required

for the negation of idolatry, it also increases the danger of “religious” idolatry. Therefore, the capacity to rule out idols and idolatry involves a kind of religious reasoning.

Fromm’s x experience involves not only differentiating between the experience that the concept of God represents and an idolatrous representation of the concept of God, but also becoming a more loving, reasonable and sensitive human being (Fromm 1966, p. 48). From a religious perspective, which Fromm was aware of, pure atheism results in an idolatrous identification of the human being with God. I claim that the x experience embodies both the “divine” experience of negative theology and the call to meet some of the ethical demands of that “non-God”, or, to employ Emmanuel Levinas’ statement, which somewhat clarifies this complexity, “We all in fact maintain that human autonomy rests on a supreme heteronomy and that the force which produces such marvelous effects, the force which institutes force, the civilizing force, is called God” (Levinas 1997, p. 11).

This is somewhat in line with the criticism of Jewish philosophers of Kant’s concept of the pure will (Der reine Wille). Hermann Cohen tried to solve the problem of moral duty by arguing that “even according to Kant’s teaching, man is not a volunteer of the moral law but has to subjugate himself to duty” (Cohen [1919] 1995, p. 345). Following Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig claimed that the worship of the categorical imperative (in Kant’s formulation) is no less than idolatrous because the human will does not function according to a physical law and cannot be reduced to a mere pure will.⁴⁰ Fromm, in my opinion, was well aware of the difficulty of discussing moral responsibility in the absence of an element that somewhat restricts personal freedom. First, he places the universal experience within the unconscious (see note 16). Moreover, he considers the commanding God as the voice of conscience heard in the x experience (and not just any voice of conscience), as there is a problem of the pathology of normalcy, which questions the individual’s “inner” moral intuition.

The x experience indicates a situation in which a person reaches his utmost humanistic potential and in which the idols that the individual worships have been uncovered and idolatrous attitudes have been overcome. In my opinion, the x experience should be seen as the momentary fulfillment of the (Cohenian) continuous messianic task. Given that the humanistic task of rejecting idolatry is never-ending (we constantly face alienation and are tempted to worship idols and turn ideas into ideology, etc.), there is an eternal need for this commanding “non-God”. This is reflected in Fromm’s general social criticism on the various forms of “secular” idolatry. Thus, regarding narcissism, the idea of God “is the negation of narcissism because only God—not man—is omniscient and omnipotent” (Fromm 1964, p. 109). In addition, God demands loving the stranger (Fromm [1956] 2006, p. 45; compare with Fromm [1947] 1971b, p. 14). Creation in “the image of God” requires universality, the negation of “group narcissism” and the “capacity for an evolution of which the limits are not set” (Fromm [1966] 1969, p. 57). Regarding alienation, God forbids the worship of man-made objects and the admiration of power: political, economic, and technological. Regarding necrophilia, the correlation between biophilia and ethical orientation appears in the Bible: God demands humans choose “life” and “good” (Deuteronomy 30: 9, 15; Fromm [1968] 2010, p. 30).⁴¹ Fromm’s approach holds that these crucial imperatives must be freed from the heteronomous framework of “commandments given by God in revelation” and integrated into the freedom of the human will. Indeed, his characterization of idolatry and idol worship as both mental and ethical problems turn these commandments into a natural law. That is, for Fromm, the Seven Noahide Laws and the Ten Commandments are ethically binding, regardless of whether one believes them to be the formulation of a secular ethical system arrived at through human reasoning and projected onto a Godhead, or the literal will of a divine being (Schimmel 2009, p. 41).

Fromm’s nontheistic mysticism turns revelation into the x experience, and the divine command into the humanistic–religious voice of conscience. He states that “only those who experience it [ethical-mysticism] will understand the formulation, and they do need any formulation” (Fromm [1950] 1955, p. 94). In a certain sense, the mystic understands that God demands that he be rejected, and this includes the rejection of the demander himself. In Fromm’s words, “having being defeated by man is precisely what pleases God” (Fromm

[1966] 1969, p. 64) and “It seems that [Adam and Eve’s] disobedience was even within God’s plan” (Fromm [1964] 1971a, p. 11).

Fromm states that in the Rabbinic literature, God is conceived as being a supreme ruler and lawgiver: “He is the King above all Kings”. He adds that “while this is generally true, there are statements in the Talmudic law and later Jewish literature which are indicative of a trend that is to make men completely autonomous, even to the point where he will be free from God” (Fromm [1966] 1969, p. 62). In this context, Fromm presents the well-known Talmudic story, *The Oven of Akhnai* (discussed later), and various examples drawn from Hasidic legends to illustrate a different conception of God than what is typically found in the Hebrew Bible. He concludes that Jewish thinkers were the most radical representatives of internationalism and of the idea of humanism (Fromm [1966] 1969, p. 69).

Indeed, there are significant similarities between his nontheism and his understanding of the concept of God in Judaism. Fromm states that in the Jewish tradition, “one must not talk *about* God lest God be transformed into an idol” (Fromm [1966] 1969, p. 28), and that in Jewish theology [unlike in Christian theology], “*the acknowledgment of God is, fundamentally, the negation of idols*” (Fromm [1966] 1969, p. 35; italics in the original). Consequently, if Judaism, according to Fromm, does not demand belief, and if its essential and highest demand and messianic goal is the negation of idolatry—based on the commandment, “Whoever denies idolatry is as if he fulfilled the whole Torah (BT, Hullin 5a)” (Fromm [1966] 1969, p. 40; Fromm 2022, p. 14; see Pinkas 2021)—then, from Fromm’s perspective, not only does his nontheism not contradict or challenge Judaism (which for Fromm is a combination of prophetic, Rabbinic, and Hasidic Judaism), but it broadly expresses it. My purpose here is not to present an apologetic defense of Judaism, nor do I suggest that Fromm’s ideas are exclusively Jewish. Rather, I emphasize that, from a Jewish perspective, his nontheistic position is not considered atheism.

5. Nontheism Is Not Atheism

In my opinion, and unlike some scholars—for example, Don Hausdorff, who claims that Fromm “has remained an atheist ever since 1927” (Hausdorff 1972, p. 65), and Daniel Burston, who states unequivocally that “Fromm was nonetheless a committed atheist” (Burston 1991, p. 29)—there is no moment when Fromm’s nontheism becomes pure atheism. With the exception of the picture obtained from his doctoral thesis and some early opinion articles, at a time when he was still living a religious lifestyle, it can be said with certainty that Fromm was not a theist. However, he was also not an atheist in today’s terms.⁴² Braune concludes that “One should be careful not to give too much weight to identifying Fromm as atheist. [...] Fromm’s approach to the existence of God walks a fine line between atheism and negative theology” (Braune 2014, pp. 188–89, fn. 24).⁴³

Funk states that for Fromm, “all statements about God are fundamentally statements about man. Divine love and justice are symbols of man’s own powers of love and justice, even though they are ascribed to God” (Funk 1982, p. 110). Nevertheless, unlike Simone Weil, Jan Assmann, Regina Schwartz, and Hagai Dagan, for instance, Fromm does not attribute undesirable traits, such as narcissism, necrophilia, and destructiveness, to God. That is, for Fromm, God as the x element is primarily a positive symbol of “man’s own [positive] powers”.⁴⁴ The x element advocates for agnosticism on the basis of negative theology, which is meant to permit the freedom of the human being. Indeed, its fulfillment does not depend on any divine transcendent factor. However, this freedom, on the one hand, requires a perspective on spiritual potentials (reason, love, productivity, biophilia)⁴⁵ and, on the other, recognition of the limitations of the human being, as well as a sense of duty and responsibility that, in Fromm’s approach, are essentially religious.

In *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, Fromm declares that “The real conflict is not between belief in God and ‘atheism’ but between a humanistic, religious attitude and an attitude which is equivalent to idolatry regardless of how this attitude is expressed—or disguised—in conscious thought” (Fromm [1950] 1955, p. 114).⁴⁶ Fromm’s humanism goes beyond the religious–secular division. Being an atheist, according to Fromm, does not exempt a person

from his or her (conscious or unconscious) religiousness or from the influence of the factor of faith on their character.⁴⁷ Moreover, being an atheist does not deprive him or her of the possibility of the x experience.⁴⁸ In other words, the challenges that an atheist and a religious believer face to realize the x experience are not essentially different but rather result from the differing social orientations that shape the individual's social character (productive or nonproductive orientations, see Funk 1982, pp. 27–49). Fromm advocates for a spiritual renewal that involves rejecting dogmatism, conservatism, and stagnation, regardless of whether a person is religious or secular. Dubose states, “The nameless God, described in Fromm’s final, evolutionary stage of the God concept, resists conceptualization, and thus, reification. Reification is idolatry”. He concludes that “To reject theism, though, is not to reject *homo religiosus*” (Dubose 2000, p. 221; see Durkin 2014, p. 31).

Fromm’s broad definition of the concept of religion encompasses social, political, and cultural phenomena that are not typically classified as religious phenomena (Fromm [1976] 2008, pp. 85, 110: “Indeed, in this broad sense of the word no culture of the past or present, and it seems no culture in the future, can be considered as not having religion.”). In addition, his nontheistic mysticism acknowledges no supreme being, entity, person, or spirit that exists independently of the natural order. However, unlike Dubose, I contend that Fromm has distanced himself from a specific type of theism—namely, the conceptions of God that are prevalent in the hegemonic Western Judeo-Christian tradition.

The x element is not God as the creator, or as a punishing and rewarding external lawgiver. Nonetheless, the x element is related to the human being’s own powers: autonomy, love, and reason. On the one hand, Fromm claims that “Man creates himself in the historical process which began with his first act of freedom—the freedom to disobey—to say ‘no’” (Fromm [1966] 1969, pp. 70–71), and that “The act of disobedience as an act of freedom is the beginning of reason” (Fromm 1942, p. 28; Fromm [1966] 1969, p. 72). On the other hand, Fromm claims that “Paradoxically, I truly follow God’s will if I forget about God” (Fromm [1960] 1986, p. 41). Thus, the x element illustrates an unresolved hermeneutical circle of reason and freedom. The freedom to disobey (God’s irrational demands) is the origin of reason, but at the same time, reason (i.e., the human being as created in the image of God with the capacity of reason and love) has to precede a genuine rebellion (Fromm 1966, p. 162).⁴⁹ In other words, as Maurice Friedman has formulated, “If man is a being made in the likeness of God and God is a symbol of the powers of man, we have a perfect circle!” (M. Friedman 1967, p. 234. Quoted in Lundgren 1988, p. 22, fn. 31). This tension, in my opinion, underlies Fromm’s nontheistic mysticism. That is, human beings can be autonomously commanded by their capacity for reason, but this capacity is based on the notion that the human being is not an object among the other objects of nature. Rather, the human being is a part of nature yet also transcends it (Fromm [1947] 1971b, p. 40; Fromm [1950] 1955, p. 22; Fromm [1962] 1980, p. 165). The human being is “partly divine, partly animal; partly infinite, partly finite” (Fromm [1955] 1991, p. 24). Fromm’s position confronts both approaches: that humans are shaped exclusively by either biology or culture. The mystical position can manage and incorporate paradoxes, but it also includes the *infinite* that is beyond culture. The x element is an infinite God that includes atheism within it.

Nontheistic mysticism, therefore, is a two-sided coin. One side promotes the religious–mystical factor within a secular–humanistic system. The other side promotes the secular–humanistic factor within a common religious system. Concerning the latter, the meaning is that religion without a humanistic–secular element (e.g., reason and love as objects of devotion instead of religious dogmas) constitutes a partial and inappropriate frame of orientation. Concerning the former, the meaning is that an ethical system would not be complete without a mystical–religious element (e.g., the x element, the rejection of idolatry, and the need for relatedness, which nourishes the ethical orientation). As such, nontheism can be viewed as a safeguard against theistic religious ideas, which may carry the risks of religious dogmatism, fanaticism, authoritarianism, collective narcissism, tribalism, and political messianism. In contrast, mysticism, which involves a religious experience of unity

that is beyond the enclosed ego and that cannot be expressed in words, can be seen as a safeguard against the various social and personal risks associated with secular–humanistic traditions, which might include moral relativism, dogmatic ideologies, anthropocentrism, non-pluralistic uniformity, conformity, narcissistic individualism, and, in general, the necrophilic enslavement of humans by technology and economic interests. More importantly, the mystical experience promotes the internal religious sense of moral responsibility.

Consequently, according to Fromm, theism should include within it a certain quality of atheism, and vice versa, in order to minimize the risk of idolatry. Following this, we can argue that the experience of nontheistic mysticism, according to Fromm, fosters the need for a new humanistic religion, or a new religious humanism. However, this need, says Fromm, “is not an attack on the existing religions”,⁵⁰ but a need for a new, nontheistic, noninstitutionalized “religiosity”.

6. Religious Humanism

According to Fromm, we cannot distinguish between humanistic and religious values but only between authoritarian and humanistic forms of religion.⁵¹ This claim is based on two assumptions: a. Humanism is founded on a religious–mystical unitary view of humanity (as per above). b. All social phenomena carry religious (and idolatrous) characteristics (Fromm [1950] 1955, pp. 51–52; Fromm [1955] 1991, pp. 170–71). Hence, the human being is “homo religiosus” not only because faith is a basic character trait “which pervades all his experiences” and “Man cannot live without faith” (Fromm [1947] 1971b, pp. 199–210), but also by the very fact of belonging to a social group that shares a frame of orientation and an object of devotion (e.g., family, a club of interest, union, tribe, clan, party, nation, etc.). Regarding the “religious” person, there can indeed be a contradiction between the person’s official religious beliefs and his private “secret” religion (Fromm [1976] 2008, p. 111). The uncovering of a person’s secret religion (i.e., of his idol and hence his idolatry and alienation) from a psychoanalytic–humanistic point of view is a necessity for human freedom (Fromm [1950] 1955, pp. 31–33; Fromm [1966] 1969, p. 40; Funk 2009, pp. 16, 29).⁵² Following this, it is permissible to assume that Fromm’s religiosity is his nontheistic mystical position, which ultimately constitutes the psychological and intellectual basis of his humanism.

Fromm was a distinct humanist thinker, and it is accepted in research that his humanist position is the core that connects his various writings in different fields. He was aware of the disagreements over the definition of humanism,⁵³ and the psychological, ethical and political risks involved in misunderstanding humanism.⁵⁴ Generally, the risk is that a preoccupation with a concept or a term could develop into an ideology (Evans 1966, p. 90), which would mean a departure from life itself. This issue is present in both Marx’s criticism of Hegel and the Zen Buddhist texts that Fromm investigated. Moreover, Jewish philosophers since Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, and others have been explicitly sensitive to the shortcomings and problems of (Kantian, Hegelian, and secular) humanism. On this subject, for instance, there is a similarity between Fromm and Emmanuel Levinas’ approaches. Levinas argues that the passion leading to building a decent and moral society includes an internal forgetfulness of moral responsibility. That is, humanism might worship its principles and consequently forget itself within rhetoric and ideology. Hence, Levinas acknowledges the presence of anti-humanism inherent in the core of humanism (Levinas 1997, p. 277; Ben-Pazi 2023, p. 129). Therefore, dialogic education is of great importance.

For Fromm, humanism is not a rigid ideology or a dogmatic doctrine, yet there are concepts in his approach that form the basis of a humanistic orientation. Along with defining humanism, he explains its opposites—specifically, what humanism is not. The positive mode emphasizes human dignity, the unity of humanity and affirmations of life.⁵⁵

“Humanism, both in its Christian religious and in its secular, nontheistic manifestations, is characterized by faith in man, in his possibility to develop to ever higher stages, in the unity of the human race, in tolerance and peace, and in rea-

son and love as the forces which enable man to realize himself, to become what he can be. [...] The most important and the most fundamental thought of humanism is the idea that mankind—humanity (humanitas)—is not an abstraction but a reality [...] that each individual represents all of humanity⁵⁶ and, hence, that all men are equal, not in their gifts and talents, but in their basic human qualities. This concept of equality is rooted in the Judaeo-Christian tradition". (Fromm 1964, pp. 69–70; see Fromm's Credo in Fromm [1962] 1980, p. 136)

The positive definition of humanism as "faith in man" is not so obvious if we consider that humanism emerged following the rejection of the previous religious belief system, which is, indeed, not the case with Fromm. Martin Buber, for example, sees "faith in man" as the foundation of "believing humanism", which cannot be considered atheistic or secular.⁵⁷ The humanist, writes Fromm, "experiences in himself all of humanity [...]. He is a skeptic and a man of faith. [...] He is a man of faith because he believes in that which potentially exists, although it has not yet been born" (Fromm 1966, p. 170; Fromm 1964, p. 73). Fromm provides several lists of great humanists, revolutionary characters, and non-idolaters in human history, including mystics, philosophers, and founders of religions (see Lundgren 1988, p. 68). Thus, Fromm's "positive" definition of humanism clearly and prominently features a religious component.

The negative mode of the definition sees humanism as a reaction to alienation, to irrational forms of authoritarianism and, in general, to threats of dehumanization: religious fanaticism, extreme nationalism and enslavement of the human being by economic means (Fromm 1964, pp. 70–71). Under Fromm's humanism, all heteronomous determinations are rejected, including the external divine authority, the authority of a leader or a party, or the authority of intelligence in the realm of technology. His humanism opposes any form of irrational authority, but also rational authority that is unbiophilic, such as the authority of sophisticated machines, computers, and AI (Fromm [1964] 1971a, pp. 42, 57; and see there in p. 65 his definition of the *Homo mechanicus*). Thus, Fromm's negative definition of humanism also involves a religious component—namely, humanism as a reaction to idolatry.

7. Nontheistic Jewish Humanism

Fromm does not belong to those thinkers who thought that religion was opposed to humanism (for example, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, who clearly distinguished between religion and humanism)⁵⁸ or that humanism would replace religion (such as Freud's position in *The Future of an Illusion*, or Marx's "religion is the opium of the people"). In addition, Fromm cannot be counted among those thinkers who identified humanism with a specific historical religion.⁵⁹ Fromm thought that national identity should be overcome in favor of humanism. Humanists look beyond the dimensions of their own society and the frontiers of their social existence (Fromm [1968] 2010, pp. 65–66). Similar to Cohen, but unlike Buber, Fromm most likely feared that if national identity [e.g., modern Zionism] were not renounced, then a Jewish humanist project—or any specific religious–humanist project, for that matter—would be in danger of idolatry (the worship of power, nationalism, and patriotism, phenomena that exemplify incestuous relationships). Hence, for him there is a parallel between overcoming formal theism and overcoming nationalism as both carry the risk of idol worshiping and idolatry.

Kieran Durkin states that "Fromm's radical humanism is most deeply and profoundly influenced by his understanding of the Judaic tradition" (Durkin 2014, pp. 43, 53–54; see L. Friedman 2013, p. 260). Indeed, in *You Shall Be as Gods*, Fromm distinctly identifies the theoretical concept of humanistic religion with his understanding of Judaism. Lundgren writes with humor "Not only did Erich Fromm have a genuinely Jewish nose, he also had a genuinely Jewish soul" (Lundgren 1988, p. 120). Though Fromm is certainly different from Hermann Cohen, Martin Buber, Hugo Bergmann, Ernst Simon, Emmanuel Levinas, Eugen Kohn, Abraham Heschel, Mordechai Kaplan, Jacob Agus, and, in our times, Paul Mendes-Flohr, Ephraim Meir, Hanoch Ben-Pazi, and other Jewish thinkers who used and

still use terms that Fromm avoided—such as “moral monotheism”, “biblical humanism”, “Hebrew humanism”, and “Jewish humanism”—his humanism is nonetheless largely based on Jewish thought. He sees the Old Testament as a revolutionary book because its theme is the humanistic liberation of the human being. Additionally, for him, this anthropological (and not theological) task is the Rabbinic (Halachic) teaching itself. To a certain extent, the authentic Judaism, as Fromm saw it, is a nontheological religion, and there are indeed justifications for holding that opinion.⁶⁰ For example, Fromm claims that “The logical consequence of Jewish monotheism is the absurdity of theology” (Fromm [1966] 1969, p. 39). He stresses that knowing God in the prophetic sense is the same as loving God: “it is not speculation about God or his existence”; “it is not theo-logy”; and, quoting the Talmudic commentary on Jeremiah 16: 11, “They have forsaken Me and have not kept My Torah [. . .] If only they had forsaken Me and kept My Torah” (Fromm [1966] 1969, p. 34).

In *You Shall Be as Gods*, Fromm brings at length the known Talmudic tale *The Oven of Akhnai* (BT, Bava Metzia 59a–b; Fromm [1966] 1969, pp. 62–64). In the story, miracles and divine voices are democratically rejected. For Fromm, the story teaches that God’s own will is “man’s autonomy”. God laughs as he proclaims, “My sons have defeated me”. Despite the anthropomorphism, Fromm sees this God as a symbol of man’s own powers—namely, freedom—rather than as a worshiped idol and the recipient object of projection. In this case, God is free from his role as an authority. Nevertheless, His wish is human and social freedom. He is neither strong nor perfect, but a humorous God who rebels against himself, thereby softening religious fanaticism from within. It should be noted that in the story, God does not grant absolute human freedom but rather freedom of interpretation of the law, which is His creation anyway. Fromm radicalizes the humanistic element and interprets this legal-hermeneutical freedom as a religious one—namely, as an utter negation of God’s law for the sake of human autonomy. However, Fromm deviates from the common interpretations according to which God explicitly grants ‘legal’ but not religious freedom. In my opinion, Fromm found in this story a theistic atmosphere that vitally encompasses atheism, because only as such can it be free from idolatry. Or, in Levinas’ words, “It is certainly a great glory for the creator to have set up a being capable of atheism, a being which, without having been *cause sui* [self-caused], has an independent view and word and is at home with itself” (Levinas 1979, pp. 58–59).

To sum up this section, nontheistic mysticism is a religious–humanistic position that seeks to direct thoughts and actions rather than a vague idea or abstract notion. On the one hand, it teaches that, according to Fromm, a productive and biophilic frame of orientation does not involve a belief in the existence of God, because this might lead to obedience and submission to irrational authority, world-denying mysticism or an eschatological faith that removes the human being from his responsibility to himself and to humanity.⁶¹ On the other hand, a belief in the human being alone (i.e., as defined only by scientific–evolutionary concepts, see Browning 1975, p. 117) cannot guarantee the accomplishment of humanism—a nontheistic mystical element of a divine–human potential of a “new spiritual form” is required.⁶²

Fromm’s nontheistic mystical position reinforces the notion that any project of liberation—whether self-transformation from the mode of *having* to *being*, awakening a self-consciousness, making the unconscious conscious, overcoming different forms of alienation and destructive ideologies (fanaticism, narcissistic attitudes and forms of neurotic “secrete religion”, pseudo-freedom, and other forms of pathology of normalcy) and, finally, accomplishing productive–biophilic–humanistic conscience—is conditioned to a frame of orientation that primarily aims to establish *unity*, harmony, and fulfilling the need for relatedness. Namely, the self attains through giving itself in relation to what is not itself, to others or other beings (M. Friedman 1967, p. 240). Jarno Hietalahti identifies the need for relatedness as a crucial component of Fromm’s humanism, which could well serve as a genuine response to post-humanist, trans-humanist, and anti-humanist approaches. Hence, for Fromm, the very core of humanity is based on relatedness: we cannot be individuals without being related to others (Hietalahti 2023).⁶³ From a philosophical perspective, this

originated in the principle of the One. The ideas of the One, oneness and unity are the building blocks of Fromm's humanism, and he considers them the achievements of the mystic in the theistic and nontheistic traditions. Messianism, according to Fromm, illustrates how the idea of unity constitutes the frame of orientation that dictates the individual's moral responsibility (Fromm 1966, p. 209).

8. Fromm's Mysticism: Background

Fromm was introduced to Jewish mysticism during the first two decades of his life while participating in Frankfurt's intellectual Jewish life.⁶⁴ However, he learned about Judaism from thinkers who had a rational, critical and often negative view of mysticism. Fromm studied with the Orthodox Rabbi Nehemiah Nobel (1871–1922). "Nobel", writes Fromm, "was a mystic, deeply steeped in Jewish mysticism as well as in the thought of Western humanism" (Fromm [1966] 1969, p. 14). Franz Rosenzweig also called Nobel a "mystic" and was impressed by the way Nobel delivered his lessons and sermons, which were sometimes described in magical terms.⁶⁵ Nobel indeed, at the very least, taught Kabbalah at the opening lecture of the Jewish Lehrhaus. However, his essays do not explicitly refer to Kabbalistic literature.

Nobel believed that knowledge of the Talmud and Halacha and observance of Jewish laws, rather than knowledge of Kabbalah, was at the core of Jewish life. Generally, Nobel combined German culture (Schopenhauer, Kant and, especially, Goethe) with non-dogmatic Judaism based on the Hebrew Bible, the prophets' writings and Halachic literature, and believed in the importance of Zionism for the renewal of Judaism. His emphasis on the social-moral aspects of Judaism was influenced by Hermann Cohen, who was well-known for rejecting mysticism and Kabbalah, recognizing them as irrational and mythological pantheistic threats to a moral monotheism.⁶⁶ According to Cohen, mysticism is a danger to our moral orientation: it is an "imaginary theory" and "delusion" that is in contradiction with logical reasoning (Cohen [1919] 1995, pp. 108, 414). Moral monotheism necessarily excludes mysticism because it obscures the relationship between the human being and the transcendent God by giving the illusion that it is possible to reach unity with God, instead of the enduring moral aspiration of accomplishing *nearness* to God (Cohen [1919] 1995, pp. 212, 306, 314; see also the discussion about mysticism and the isolation of the individual on p. 386). He declares that *religion* enters into "the methodological connection with ethics, religion—not myth, and not mysticism" (Cohen [1919] 1995, p. 168). The difference in the positions of Cohen and Fromm regarding the term mysticism, but not regarding a fundamental issue in the relationship of human beings to God, becomes clear in the light of Cohen's words: "The return to God is not union with God. The return means nothing other than what the origin means: holiness is the command and the power of God, which are transferred to man, but which do not make man and God identical. Even with this transference, God remains the Unique One" (Cohen [1919] 1995, p. 306). Fromm can agree with Cohen that unity with God actually means that the divine powers exist in the human being itself. But unlike Cohen, Fromm purges any possibility of divine transcendence and a concept of holiness, which for Cohen's method is philosophically necessary.

Another of Fromm's early mentors in Judaism was Rabbi Shlomo Baruch Rabinkow (1882–1941), who, in his teachings, blended elements of Hasidic mysticism (especially the *Tanya*, which is the main work of Chabad philosophy and mysticism) with Hermann Cohen's religious socialism. Fromm claimed that Rabinkow influenced him more than any other person, and that Rabinkow was a radical humanist "rooted in the Hasidic tradition" that "sought for and found the radical humanist attitude in the Jewish tradition, whether it was in the Prophets, the Talmud, Maimonides, or a Hasidic story. [...] his whole concept of Judaism was heavily weighted on the side of Halakhah and not theology" (in Jung 1987, p. 103).⁶⁷ In his dissertation, *The Jewish Law*,⁶⁸ accepted in 1922, Fromm describes Hasidism as the authentic expression of Judaism in modern times.⁶⁹ Under the influence of Rabinkow,⁷⁰ Fromm presents a critical approach to western mysticism and Kabbalah, which he saw (to a certain extent similarly to Cohen) as a world-denying theological doctrine

focused on the individual's ecstatic-mystical experience. Early Hasidic mysticism, however, he recognized as "mysticism of the community" and a means to strengthen the community's ties to its traditional ways in the face of the challenges of modernity. Fromm believed that Hasidism's mystical approach preserved the Jewish laws while allowing for participation in a broader social reality by charging all daily activities with spiritual meaning. His discussion of the socio-mystical element of Hasidism refers to Martin Buber's writings and Simon Dubnow's *World History of the Jewish People*.⁷¹ Fromm claimed that "Hasidism is a mysticism—if one may still use that term—of the community. It is in community, and not in the fleeting glimpses experienced in solitude, that God is realized" (Fromm 2022, p. 111).⁷² Funk notes that Fromm's fondness for Hasidism, specially Chabad Hasidism as he came to know it from Rabinkow, persisted even after he broke away from the institutionalized religious lifestyle and began to value religion in the form of "nontheistic mysticism" (Funk 1982, pp. 195–204). Funk argues that much of what Rabinkow says about the Jewish individual can later be found in Fromm's humanistic views; for example, the human being's capacities for biophilia, autonomy, productivity and loving another person as based on the love of oneself. Considering this, I contend that Fromm's nontheistic mystical position applies not only to religion but to his humanism in general (Funk 2014, pp. 46–50). The theistic component of Hasidism, as Fromm saw it, was applied to empower life and denounce human arrogance and pride. It is a frame of orientation that enables the criticism of the "human", but without impairing the dignity, productivity, and freedom of the human being. That is, the theological element broadens the frame of orientation more than the political, historical, economic, scientific, or technological viewpoints could.

Fromm's understanding of Hasidism as a mystical position that does not renounce the world and does not create a polarization between the sacred and the secular (Fromm [1968] 2010, p. 138; Lundgren 1988, pp. 67, 89) anticipates his later approach to mysticism in general, which he will recognize not as a singular phenomenon among other phenomena but rather as a unity that exists at the root of all phenomena. This will culminate in the idea that oneness and the experience of unity of the mystical *experience* is the essence of religiousness and humanistic ethics in general.⁷³ For Fromm, while the principle of universalism, as it developed from the beginning of the Enlightenment, expresses the non-theological philosophical understanding of humanity's unity, the religious mystical tradition was the most authentic way to express and actualize the individual's experience of this unity.⁷⁴ In *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, Fromm cites from a Hasidic story as an example of the "characteristic of mystical thinking" (Fromm [1950] 1955, pp. 89–90).

Fromm's nontheistic mystical position was formed even before the explicit use of the term in 1966 in *You Shall Be as Gods*. Its buds are already found in Fromm's dissertation (still in a theistic form as a rejection of religious dogmas) and later in *Man for Himself* (1947),⁷⁵ *Psychoanalysis and Religion* (1950), *The Forgotten Language* (1951), *The Sane Society* (1955), *the Art of Loving* (1956), *Psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism* (1960), *Beyond the Chains of Illusion* (1962), and *The Heart of Man* (1964). In all these writings, we can find the foundations of this position: (a) that a genuine mystical-ethical experience precedes the formation of religious concepts; (b) that the same experience of unity received different formulations in the philosophical and non-theistic traditions; and (c) that the experience of unity is essential to human development.

9. Fritz Mauthner's "Gottlose Mystik"

According to Lundgren, Fromm probably obtained the nontheistic mysticism designation from Thomas Merton (1915–1968). Merton, a Trappist monk and "modern Christian mystic", named Fromm an "atheistic mystic" in their correspondence starting in 1954, a definition that Fromm partly accepted. Nevertheless, there were also differences in opinion between them. Both agreed that true mysticism does not know God as "an object outside ourselves, as 'another being' capable of being enclosed in some human concept". Nevertheless, Fromm did not respond to Merton's claim that "...the majority of true mystics stand and fall with the existence or non-existence of God" (Lundgren 1988, pp. 71–72).⁷⁶

Among the mystical writings that interested Fromm, at least starting from the sixth decade of his life, were the writings of Meister Eckhart, which Fromm often quotes. Eckhart's mysticism represents an important development in that it is a "temple of reason", where negative theology and the concept of "the one" can coexist (Fromm [1975] 1999b, pp. 37–38).⁷⁷ Fromm presents Eckhart as a nontheistic medieval mystic and revolutionary of his time (similar to Buddha, Marx, and Schweitzer). Fromm calls him "one of the boldest and most radical thinkers" and "the greatest master of life". Eckhart appears in Fromm's list of great humanists of the revolutionary character alongside Buddha, Jesus, and others (Lundgren 1988, pp. 68–67). Fromm's discussions about negative theology, paradoxical logic, the experience and the mode of *being* over *having* all include references to Eckhart. According to Fromm, Eckhart did not explicitly deny the existence of God because a nontheistic approach was not acceptable at the time he lived, and his theistic statements should be understood as allegorical only (similar to Maimonides' approach, which admittedly influenced Eckhart). Lundgren mentioned Arthur Schopenhauer and Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki as two thinkers who saw a closeness between Eckhart and Buddhism based on the nontheistic factor (Lundgren 1988, p. 71).

In addition to this, an equally noteworthy influence that should be taken into account is that of the philosopher Fritz Mauthner (1849–1923).⁷⁸ Mauthner's influence on Fromm has not yet been discussed in the research, but there is a solid basis for its importance, not only for the way that Fromm understood Eckhart, but also, mainly, for his own nontheistic mystical position. Fromm starts his article *Meister Eckhart* with a reference to Mauthner's *Der Atheismus und seine Geschichte im Abendlande*. He writes, "Eckhart [was] an adherent of realism, and thus, as F. Mauthner (1920) has pointed out, was able to base his pantheism on the concept of God as the one and all-embracing reality" (Fromm 1994, pp. 116–17).

In my opinion, this minor comment has significant weight. Fritz Mauthner is perhaps a forgotten philosopher. However, already in the early twenties of the last century, he coined the term "Gottlose Mystik" (Godless mysticism). In *Der Atheismus*, Mauthner attributes this term to Buddhism as well as to Eckhart while extensively discussing the history of mysticism in the context of his discussions on *der Friede in gottloser Mystik* (peace in godless mysticism) and *das Streit um den Gottesbegriff* (the dispute over the concept of God). At the beginning of the 20th century, Mauthner refers to the similarity between Schopenhauer, Buddhism, and Eckhart in the context of *unity* and nontheism (Mauthner [1920] 1989, pp. 408, 415–17, 423–27), and to Spinoza in the context of mysticism (Weiler 1970, p. 293). In fact, Mauthner created a precedent to refer to Eckhart, the medieval Christian mystic, within a context of nontheistic mysticism. Inspired by Eckhart, Mauthner saw mysticism as the apex of his own philosophy (Weiler 1958, p. 86).

I believe that Fromm, at the very least, knew the basic ideas in Mauthner's philosophy of language and his position on nontheistic mysticism. Mauthner describes his own mysticism as *godless*. For him, this term does not imply any assertion about the existence of any entity; rather, godless mysticism is best described as "an inarticulate feeling of unity" (Weiler 1970, p. 292). Mauthner believed that godless mysticism was the essence, and the spiritual core, of religion. This anticipates Fromm's position that the mystical movements carried a humanistic and anti-authoritarian spirit (e.g., Fromm [1976] 2008, p. 114). In addition, Mauthner presented Spinoza as a Jewish atheist and representative of the godless mystical approach with "his so-called pantheism, the overwhelming feeling of the All-One" (Mauthner 1924, p. 9). A similar position can be found in Fromm's thought.

Mauthner is mainly known for his philosophy of language and linguistic skepticism. He considered language a deceiving tool for human knowledge.⁷⁹ He attempted to show that insofar as knowledge is mediated by words, language is both unnecessary and impossible as a tool for perceiving reality (Pisano 2023, p. 215). He stated that his two important works, *Critique of Language* and the *History of Atheism*, have more in common than mere authorship; they are intertwined. For Mauthner, the critique of language cannot transcend the limits of language but only points to them. By doing so, it also points to a transcendent reality that has no limits. The critique of language, via this route, not only leads to mys-

ticism but is mysticism itself (see Weiler 1970, p. 291). A critique of language must teach freedom from language as well, as the highest form of self-freedom. Hence, it is silence that enables unity with the self and non-self,⁸⁰ and nature. The *godless mystic* is torn between silence and the desire to communicate his silence. Silence is an attempt to say what cannot be said. On the one hand, nothing is possible, while on the other, everything is possible (Weiler 1970, pp. 295–96).⁸¹

I believe that some elements of Mauthner's thought can be found in Fromm's writings. For example, the discussion of the concept of God in *You Shall be as Gods* begins with a critique of language that exemplifies a linguistic skepticism. He defines the separation between the concept and the experience (Fromm [1966] 1969, p. 19), utilizing Marx's concept of alienation. Following this, Fromm states his nontheistic mystical position, which ultimately teaches that the *experience* of unity is at the core of all religions and fundamentally beyond words (although the conceptualization between religions is different, the basic experience is the same). Hence, for Fromm as well, linguistic skepticism and mysticism are intertwined.

In Fromm's approach, language and its development are related to moral consciousness—that is, a change in verbal categories expresses a change in attitude. In *To Have or to Be?*, Fromm claims that the language we use today reflects the spread of the *having* mode, which is characterized by a society built on property and greed (Fromm [1976] 2008, p. 17; Fromm 2000, pp. 46–37; Fromm [1968] 2010, p. 91). Similar to Mauthner (see note 79), Fromm argues that in recent centuries, nouns had been replacing verbs. Verbs designated a state of inner activity—a being mode—while nouns stood for things and possessions. We possess a house, an idea, and even love itself. “But to express an activity by *to have* in connection with a noun is an erroneous use of language, because processes and activities cannot be possessed; they can only be experienced” (Fromm [1976] 2008, pp. 17–19; and see L. Friedman 2013, p. 322). When we talk about things that are not related to the experience, we use words in a way that is inappropriate and misleading. Generally, Fromm holds that language has an immense influence on our moral perception and on our relationships with the human and nonhuman environment. Language can initiate emotional retreat, moral distress, and the freezing of empathy. For example, Fromm argues that this is radically expressed in the way we use different words to describe living animals and animals intended for eating (Fromm 1973, pp. 120–21). In light of Mauthner's approach, Fromm's nontheistic mysticism can be understood as a part of a linguistic humanistic project. If humanism is a struggle against the idolatrous processes of alienation, according to which a term loses its meaning—namely, I can free myself from something, but I do not “have” freedom as a noun, because freedom is just a word, an alienated term (Evans 1966, pp. 95–96)—then nontheistic mysticism is an invitation to dynamically intervene in the processes of meaning formation. The fulfillment of Frommian religious humanism must involve the critique of language, and thus liberation from illusions, superstitions, absolutisms, ideologies, and the politicization of language that serve as a tool for authoritarianism. Nontheistic mysticism is a consciousness mechanism aimed at the fine-tuning of the individual's moral compass, which is affected by the pathologies of normalcy that prevail in all cultures.

10. Concluding Remarks

This paper suggests that the humanistic ethic offered by Fromm is closely related to his nontheistic mystical position. Fromm recognized the failure of humanism as a completely atheistic–secular project since the Renaissance and Enlightenment, in that “solidarity” cannot fully replace the *experience* of the “one world” offered by humanistic religion (see Wilde 2004, p. 3) and that the humanistic consciousness involves an experience that belongs to the “psycho-spiritual field”. His broad definition of religion, as well as the use of the concept of idolatry as immanent in human existence, reinforces this claim. According to Fromm, one cannot speak of a humanistic transformation without mentioning these two terms: religion and idolatry. Idolatry, in its various and changing forms, will always pose a challenge to the individual and to society.

I argue that Frommian humanism should not be understood, as is often portrayed in the research literature, as merely radical or normative humanism that advocates humanistic principles based on the rejection of former religious traditions. Rather, if we accept the notion that nontheistic mysticism defines humanism, then it is a sort of *broad humanism*. This kind of broad humanism, unlike common humanism, incorporates in its frame of orientation the religious experience of unity and negative theology.

For Fromm, nontheistic mysticism is a category that is relevant to both the theistic and nontheistic religions. At the same time, it challenges the dichotomy between religion and secularism. While the historical religions led to a separation in the history of humanity, for Fromm, mysticism preserved the original core of the principle of unity. Therefore, unlike religions, mysticism connected the various phenomena and did not stand beside or beyond them. That is, the term teaches that there is a fundamental unity at the root of human existence, which can still be experienced by the individual, through the x experience. Franz Rosenzweig once acknowledged, “God plainly did not create religion, but rather the world”, expressing his discontent with the separation brought by religions. Indeed, as Rosenzweig is careful with the use of the term religion (which is crucial for liberating God from religion, which, for him, is necessary for human freedom), Fromm is careful with the use of the term God. The concept of God, as the x element in the nontheistic mystical approach, is not only a negation of determinism and heteronomy, but also implies that the human being is not a god and that human accomplishments, however great they might be, cannot be considered divine if they do not incorporate “the need for relatedness” and moral responsibility. The nontheistic mystical position includes atheism but goes beyond it. The x element expresses the infinite possibility of transcending the ego and reducing narcissism. Consequently, the x experience involves a certain biophilic component (see [Fromm 1994](#), p. 160; and see his definition of biophilic ethics in [Fromm \[1964\] 1971a](#), pp. 49–50) based on the premise that human moral autonomy rests on a kind of supreme heteronomy that transcends both language and solipsistic intuition.

The x experience, being a unique experience of the individual, poses a challenge for a social thinker such as Fromm, who sought a (messianic) way to a sane and humanistic society. Thus, the x experience is an experience of oneness that also involves criticizing the politicization of language, the formation of ideologies, and is closely connected to the fight against idolatry.

The nontheistic mystical position is not only problematic, controversial, and paradoxical—which helps explain Fromm’s marginalization in the social science research community and the failure of psychoanalytical training institutes to integrate it into their teaching—but it also puzzles, raises questions, and aims to reexamine our language, philosophical stances, and beliefs. In *The Forgotten Language*, Fromm claims that modern man has forgotten the universal language of symbols through which inner experiences, feeling and thoughts are expressed as if they were sensory experiences, events in the outer world ([Fromm 1951](#), p. 6). The nontheistic mysticism is Fromm’s symbolic universal language for the experience of the One and of unity. John Schaar commented that Fromm’s *The Forgotten Language* “rests on the premise that all human beings share a common ‘forgotten language’, and that this language expresses the universal concerns that arise from the human situation” ([Schaar 1961](#), p. 46, fn.*). Schaar intended to point out a weakness of essentialism in Fromm’s approach⁸² but, in my opinion, unintentionally pointed to a strength. Fromm’s social psychoanalysis perceived the human being as a social being, and sees the aim of psychology as solving problems of relatedness between the individual and the world: the split between reason and nature, and the dichotomy between the birth of individuality and the pain of aloneness and fear of separation. Consequently, love, as a spontaneous affirmation of others while preserving the individual self, is an overcoming of that split. For Fromm, love for one person is only a condition for loving humanity and the world: “All men are part of Adam, and all women part of Eve” ([Fromm \[1956\] 2006](#), p. 52). That is, relatedness, overcoming alienation, relationships, and achieving union are crucial

for self-realization, and eventually for a sane society. These matters are at the core of this forgotten language.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Fromm's writing contains some complex philosophical ideas, such as his concept of human nature, which contains a contradiction rooted in the predicament of human existence: the human being is both a product of natural evolution and a subject of natural laws, but, at the same time, is also separate from nature and transcends it with reason and self-awareness (Fromm [1966] 1969, p. 71; Fromm 1994, p. 100; Fromm [1964] 1971a, pp. 20–24; Fromm [1976] 2008, p. 137).
- ² (Scholem [1941] 1995, p. 6). "History rather shows that the great mystics were faithful adherents of the great religions" (Hallamish 1999, pp. 3–4). Schweid claimed that even among rational thinkers (who did not necessarily focus on mystical writings but whose thought deals with religious experience), mysticism includes an element of prophetic messianism within it (Schweid 1992, pp. 83–106). That is, in contrast to Scholem, who differentiated between the biblical prophecy and the Kabbalah, Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century, according to Schweid, saw the prophetic experience (in the Hebrew Bible) as a mystical experience—that is, prophecy as a form of mysticism. The prophet's message is not to teach the experience itself but morality, love of God, keeping the commandments, etc. Hence, there is a connection between prophetic mysticism and morality.
- ³ John Schaar, an ardent critic of Fromm, even accuses him of using "the language of mystical religion and not of empirical science" (Schaar 1961, p. 38; and see Funk 1982). In this important book and other works, Funk underscores the significant role of religion and religious critique in understanding Fromm's humanism.
- ⁴ Wilde claims that Fromm's "radical humanism is often couched in a rhetoric of redemption or salvation. [...] If Fromm's messianism unwittingly leads him away from a politics of self-realization toward one of mystical deliverance, then clearly he is undermining his own project" (Wilde 2004, p. 54).
- ⁵ Fromm scholars agree that it is crucial to consider the Jewish roots of his thought (see, e.g., Pinkas 2020, p. 149, fn. 2, 3). Glen claims that Fromm's reliance on the Old Testament and the Talmud to support his thought in general indicates that he has not been emancipated from "his earlier religious faith" (Glen 1966, p. 23). In my opinion, Fromm did not seek to liberate himself from the Jewish "faith". All his life, he claimed that Judaism does not demand faith—that is, Judaism was never based on religious dogmas and even rejected them. However, Jewish thought always accompanied him.
- ⁶ In *The Forgotten Language*, Fromm distinguishes between three categories of symbols: universal, accidental, and conventional. By applying the x element to the various terms for God in different languages and religions, Fromm transforms the symbol of God from conventional (limited to a group of people sharing the same convention) to universal, in which "the relationship between the symbol and that which is symbolized is not coincidental but intrinsic. It is rooted in the experience of the affinity between an emotion or thought, on the one hand, and a sensory experience, on the other. It can be called universal because it is shared by all men. [...] Indeed, the language of the universal symbol is the one common tongue developed by the human race, a language which it forgot before it succeeded in developing a universal conventional language" (Fromm 1951, pp. 17–18). It should be noted that Fromm was not the only one who used the symbol X for God. Already in 1953, Kohn writes, "The term God is a verbal symbol; it must be given some content before we can use it in a way to strengthen our faith for living. So far, God has figured in our thinking as a sort of mathematical X, the assumed 'unknown quantity'" (Kohn [1953] 1963, p. 13). The concept of God in Kohn's work, as a symbol of man's powers, is strikingly similar to Fromm's approach. However, I could not find evidence that they read each other's works.
- ⁷ The term includes within it an insoluble tension between the heteronomous moral obligation as it is in the religious tradition (i.e., I am obliged to behave morally because it is God's command), and the autonomous morality in philosophy (i.e., without having the freedom to choose, my behavior cannot be considered moral). Nontheistic mysticism is an attempt to reconcile the two positions. In Fromm's approach (as well as in Hermann Cohen's approach), there is no immanent contradiction between religion and morality, but rather between a humanistic religion (according to Cohen, a religion of reason) and an irrational authoritarian religion. There is an affinity between Cohen's *religion of reason* and Fromm's humanistic religion. A universal religion that is significant for moral orientation is described in both cases. The distinction is as follows: (a) Cohen asserted that Judaism is the source of the religion of reason (an argument that Fromm largely agreed with), and (b) a pure religion of reason is abstract and devoid of concrete content; hence, it is crucial to maintain its particular components (such as the Shabbat and the Day of Atonement). Fromm does not entirely agree with this assertion. Generally, in Fromm's approach, the ethical-mystical experience could serve in place of the religious tradition.
- ⁸ One could point to a logical fallacy in Fromm's basic assumptions. As is known, Fromm opposed Freud's approach, which sees institutionalized religion in its social form as a collective neurosis. In fact, Fromm attributes "neurosis" to forms of private religion

and not to institutionalized religion (which, in Fromm's approach, moves on the axis between authoritarian and humanistic). If we see the term nontheistic mysticism as Fromm's private religion, then he runs the risk of promoting a "neurotic private" religion.

- 9 See (Funk 1982, pp. 275–78). It should be noted that the attitude of the rational Jewish philosophers in the twentieth century toward mysticism was not positive. For example, Hermann Cohen opposed mysticism because it blurs the boundaries between the human being and God and between the individual and his fellow man. Franz Rosenzweig described the mystic as someone who, in his love for God, is forced to deny the world and his responsibility to it. Martin Buber rejected the sort of mysticism that denies the senses and the world in order to reach divinity.
- 10 Hermann Cohen, following Kant, believed that universality can be achieved through abstract ideas and without the need for experience. However, Cohen criticizes Kant by arguing that universalism is not sufficient to establish a moral orientation because, for this, "discovery" of the individual is required, and this does not occur in ethics but in the field of religion (with the concept of correlation—namely, covenant or "Brit"). Fromm, with his emphasis on the experience of mystical unity, expresses a continuation of this line of thought but with a different conceptual usage. I disagree with Glen's conclusion that when Fromm "speaks of monotheism, he really means monism" (Glen 1966, p. 127). In my opinion, this reduction is risky, especially because monism is a philosophical view that is the result of intellectual considerations, whereas the "One" that Fromm refers to is accessible only through experience.
- 11 In Fromm's approach, humanism did not develop out of a negation of the religious traditions (as is usually seen in historical or philosophical-analytical systems) but is rooted in them. In his interpretive approach, humanistic truth should be emphasized without obscuring its origins. His book, *You Shall Be as Gods*, draws a direct line between Judaism and humanistic religion. The two complement each other so well that one perceives that Fromm's humanistic religion has its roots in Judaism, even if it is not explicitly stated.
- 12 In this lecture, given in 1957, Fromm claims that the ethical consciousness is one and comprehensive. It is not relative to a particular field or culture but is rooted in the human being. He distinguishes between "ethics" and "morality". The former carries the risk of relativism: "Ethics would be the system of norms that fit the function of a particular society. In a society of headhunters, it is ethical to kill your enemies and shrink their heads". Ethical behavior is the behavior "which is most appropriate to unify, harmonize, and strengthen the individual, given his human constitution [...] the ethical commands of [the humanistic religions] Buddhism, Taoism, prophetic religion, and the New Testament by formulating it thus: the aim of life is to overcome one's narcissism [...] that which prevents one's being open to the world. As the mystics say, we must be empty in order to be full with the world" (Evans 1966, pp. 101–2).
- 13 Fromm's definition of awareness is different from the Greek term *Gnothi seauton* (know thyself), which gained notoriety in modern German idealistic philosophy. In Fromm's view, awareness always involves relationships. "The knowledge of man is possible only in the process of relating ourselves to him" (Fromm 1966, pp. 189–90). For him, an attitude of *relatedness* is essential to exhaust the definition of a human being: "The only way to full knowledge lies in the act of love; this act transcends thought, it transcends words" (Fromm 1966, p. 201). This position is close to the existentialist (relational) approach of Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber.
- 14 In the context of listening to "the inner voice", Fromm gives the example of a Zen meditation practice. "If you sit for fifteen or twenty minutes in the morning and try not to think of anything, but empty your mind, you see how difficult it is for you to be alone with yourself and to have a feeling 'this is me'" (Fromm 1966, p. 189). And see (Evans 1966, p. 81): "I analyze myself for forty or fifty minutes every morning. I am trying to be aware; I am trying to be very critical".
- 15 Fromm refers to the mystical experience of unity, and especially the negative theology in Eckhart's version. However, the idea that knowledge about God is equivalent to knowledge about the human being appears explicitly in Franz Rosenzweig's method in *The Star of Redemption*: "About God we know nothing. But this not-knowing is a not-knowing about God. As such, it is the beginning of our knowledge about him. The beginning, not the end. The not-knowing as end and outcome of our knowledge is the fundamental idea of 'negative theology'..." (Rosenzweig [1921] 2005, p. 31). "About man also we know nothing. And this nothing, too, is only a beginning, and even the beginning of a beginning. In him, too, the original-words awaken, the Yes that creates, the No that generates, and the And [und] that articulates" (ibid., p. 72).
- 16 (Fromm [1960] 1986, p. 58): "The unconscious is the whole man—minus that part of man which corresponds to his society. [...] Unconsciousness represents universal man, the whole man, rooted in the Cosmos; it represents the plant in him, the animal in him, the spirit in him. ..." (Fromm [1962] 1980, p. 89): "Discovering one's unconscious is, precisely, not only an intellectual act, but also an affective experience, which can hardly be put into words, if at all. [...] The process of discovering the unconscious can be described as a series of ever-widening experiences, which are felt deeply and which transcend theoretical, intellectual knowledge". See (Fromm 1992, p. 57). Fromm believed that "our consciousness represents mainly our own society and culture, while our unconscious represents the universal man in each of us" (Fromm [1964] 1971a, p. 144).
- 17 The distinction between knowledge according to Aristotle and Maimonides was made by Hermann Cohen. See (Pinkas 2020, p. 160; Fromm 2020, p. 188; Fromm [1966] 1969, pp. 74–75).
- 18 Fromm states, "I do believe that with regard to the basic facts of life, we have to live in the paradox, and we have to think in the paradox, if we want to understand life" (Funk 2009, p. 11).

- 19 The mystical union is also expressed in Fromm's theory of needs, especially the *need for relatedness* according to which "man is torn away from the primary union with nature, which characterizes animal existence. Having at the same time reason and imagination, he is aware of his aloneness and separateness, of his powerlessness and ignorance" (quoted in Funk 1982, p. 62). The *need for a frame of orientation* and an object of devotion, as well as the *need for effectiveness*, are also expressions of the dichotomy between nature and the human being. The capacity to respond to these needs productively involves, to a certain extent, an experience of unity with oneself and others. See (ibid., pp. 64–66).
- 20 A significant difference should be noted in that Rosenzweig and Levinas do not use the mystical term of unity to describe these relationships. See, e.g., (Levinas 1979, pp. 77–78, 194–96).
- 21 Regarding the models of mystical unity (introverted mysticism that turns inward and extroverted mysticism that turns outward through the senses to the world), the ecstatic model, and the transformative model, see (Koren 2010, pp. 44–53; Margolin 2021, pp. 8–12, 17). In general, Fromm does not consent to the distinction between introvert and extrovert (which Jung and James proposed in the study of the mystical experience) and instead employs the terms sadistic and masochistic.
- 22 According to Gershom Scholem, the need to give up institutionalized, dogmatic religion in favor of a universal religion drove pantheistic trends, which enabled the separation between the mystical experience and theism. See (Scholem [1941] 1995, the first lecture; and Mendes-Flohr 1984, pp. 96–139).
- 23 Most definitions refer to mysticism as a direct personal experience that is beyond normal human understanding and involves a form of spiritual search, usually spontaneous (sometimes including visions, dreaming, or a state of ecstasy). It is an experience of oneness of the self with God, the universe or an ultimate reality, or one that allows you to achieve direct knowledge of God through experience. A mystic is a person who has, to a greater or lesser degree, such direct experience—one whose religion and life are centered not merely on an accepted belief or practice, but on what he regards as first-hand personal knowledge. The online Merriam-Webster dictionary defines mysticism as: 1. the experience of mystical union or direct communion with ultimate reality reported by mystics. 2. the belief that direct knowledge of God, spiritual truth, or ultimate reality can be attained through subjective experience (such as intuition or insight). 3. (a) vague speculation: a belief without sound basis, (b) a theory postulating the possibility of direct and intuitive acquisition of ineffable knowledge or power, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mysticism> (accessed on 23 April 2024). Generally, there are two tendencies in the scholarly research of mysticism: one is phenomenological, which underlines the experience itself, and the other is historical and philological. The position that mysticism does not necessarily depend on a specific religion developed from the first approach.
- 24 The idea that negative theology leads to mysticism is not self-evident. The negative theology of Maimonides is usually seen in Jewish studies as a rational philosophical-religious approach that contrasts with a mystical-Kabbalistic one. However, scholars do address the impact of negative theology on Kabbalah. See (Wolfson 1994, pp. v–xxii; and see Idel 2004, pp. 197–226).
- 25 Unlike Kabbalah scholars and Jewish philosophers, Fromm does not delve deeply into the distinctions between prophetic and mystical experience. Fromm's perspective articulates, in a way, what Schweid refers to as "prophetic mysticism". It is a mystical experience that allows one to see life from a different perspective without a mystical detachment from the material world (see Schweid 1992). Fromm refers to the nameless God in the Hebrew Bible and in Kabbalistic literature according to his needs. He writes, "We see here the connection with the namelessness of the Tao, the nameless name of the God who reveals himself to Moses, of the 'absolute Nothing' of Meister Eckhart. Man can only know the negation, never the position of ultimate reality. [...] God becomes for Meister Eckhart 'the absolute Nothing', just as the ultimate reality is the 'En Sof', the Endless One, for the Kabbalah" (Fromm [1956] 2006, pp. 71–72).
- 26 Kieran Durkin demonstrates how this factor also characterizes the x experience, namely, that living in accordance with the x experience provides us with the seemingly paradoxical task "of realizing [a true] individuality and at the same time transcending it and arriving at the experience of universality" (Durkin 2014, p. 187).
- 27 Fromm disapproved of Marx's "religion is the opium", just as he dismissed Freud's "religion as an illusion". In fact, Fromm modifies the equation, suggesting that Marx and Freud's conclusions refer to secret religions but not to collective religions.
- 28 Rosenzweig gives a theological basis for the "immoral relationship" that characterizes the mystical experience. Just as the "Creator is always in danger of sinking back again into his hidden existence", in the same way, the mystic, according to Rosenzweig, is "in danger of returning to its enclosure" (i.e., the denial of creation, the relationship between the Creator and the world, and the natural course between creation and revelation). The mystic, with his "arrogant sense of security", is in danger of being indifferent to the world: his "soul is open to God, but because it is open only to God, it is invisible to the rest of the world and cut off from it" (Rosenzweig [1921] 2005, pp. 222–23).
- 29 Fromm offers a psychological analysis of the x experience according to five main aspects: (a) to experience life as a problem, and to be aware of the existential dichotomies of life; (b) to accept a defined hierarchy of values headed by the powers of reason, love, compassion, and courage of the human being; (c) seeing the human being as an end and never a means—measuring each action according to the question of whether or not it helps the person transform to be more human, strong, and sensitive; (d) letting go of one's "ego" (which is linked to greed and fear), openness, and emptying the self to allow response, love, and unity with the world; and (e) experiencing the transcendence, in the sense of transcending the ego: "The experience is essentially the same whether it refers to God or not".

- Not all researchers accept the assumption that there is a feature common to the various phenomena known as mysticism. For example, according to Boaz Huss, the term mysticism is a distinctly Christian theological concept that religious scholars applied indiscriminately to different cultures. Huss claims that Christian mysticism is not a universal phenomenon, and he doubts the existence of a common factor or an essential connection between the phenomenon known as Christian mysticism and its Muslim, Chinese, Indian, and Jewish counterparts (Huss 2007, pp. 9–30).
- Fromm's interpretation of positive mysticism is reminiscent of that of Martin Buber in his earlier works. Buber emphasized the experience, stating that instead of seeking unity as the knowledge hidden within diversity, the human being is expected to embody this unity. That is, according to Buber, "unity" means "presence", which is beyond intellectual recognition. Buber was also fascinated by the Eastern mystical teachings. Furthermore, Buber believed that the true embodiment of Jewish mysticism was Hasidism, and not, for example, medieval Kabbalah. The mysticism of the Baal Shem Tov, who is regarded as the founder of Hasidic Judaism, was described by Buber as realistic and activist mysticism (see Bergmann 1958, pp. 3–12). A similar approach to Jewish mysticism is presented in Fromm's dissertation from 1922. There, Fromm also criticizes Buber for not distinguishing well between Hasidic mysticism, which is communal mysticism, and the mysticism that developed in the West, which focuses on the individual (Fromm 2022, p. 111). The relationship between Fromm and Buber deserves special study that goes beyond the scope of this article.
- Regarding "normal mysticism", see, for example, (Kadushin 1964, pp. 178–82; Kadushin [1952] 2001, p. 253). However, I do not know whether Fromm was aware of Max Kadushin's (1895–1980) writings.
- It is questionable whether the x experience expresses a discovery about the nature of reality, or whether it is Fromm's basic outline of the art of living (see Braune 2014, pp. 188–89, fn. 24; compare with Durkin 2014, pp. 185–87). According to Fromm, "being in the world", abandoning the isolated self and emptying the egoistical self are the ultimate goals (see Fromm 2000, p. 65).
- In a certain sense, Fromm's concept of idolatry parallels the concept of miracle in Franz Rosenzweig's method. For Rosenzweig, the concept of miracle is outside the realms of both theology and philosophy. I am grateful to Ido Ben Harush for this insightful observation.
- (Fromm 1992, p. 43): "The prophetic and later Christian religions were originally anti-idolatric; in fact, God was conceived as the anti-idol. But in practice, the Jewish and Christian God was experienced by most believers as an idol, as the great power whose help and support could be attained through prayer, ritual, and so forth". That is, for Fromm, God as the x element can be seen as a return to the authentic monotheistic tradition. (Fromm [1955] 1991, pp. 118–19): "The principle of monotheism, in contrast [to heathen, idolatrous religions], is that man is infinite, that there is no partial quality in him which can be hypostatized into the whole. God, in the monotheistic concept, is unrecognizable and indefinable; God is not a "thing". If man is created in the likeness of God, he is created as the bearer of infinite qualities. [...] Monotheistic religions themselves have, to a large extent, regressed into idolatry. Man projects his power of love and of reason unto God; he does not feel them any more as his own powers, and then he prays to God to give him back some of what he, man, has projected unto God".
- In the context of Freud's criticism of religion, which saw dependence on God as an illusion stemming from the substitution of infantile dependence on the father, Fromm writes, "What would he have said to a religion in which there is no God, no *irrational authority* of any kind, whose main goal is exactly that of liberating man from all dependence, activating him, showing him that he, and nobody else, bears the responsibility for his fate?" (Fromm [1960] 1986, pp. 84–85, italics are mine).
- In this context, Fromm interprets the biblical term "covenant" (Genesis 9: 11). In the covenant (Brit) "man has gained the freedom of being able to challenge God in the name of God's own promises" (Fromm [1966] 1969, pp. 22–23; and see Burston 1991, p. 135, concerning Fromm's universal interpretation of the "chosen people"). The covenant is regarded as a progressive step toward a more mature view of the relationship between God and humanity (Wilde 2004, p. 48).
- According to Fromm, not only is the acknowledgment of an authority that exists beyond the human being in opposition to humanism, but it is also detrimental to mental health. For him, the connection between moral autonomy and mental health is essential (see Pinkas 2020, p. 155).
- (Fromm [1964] 1971a, p. 109): "The idea of God [...] is the negation of narcissism because only God-not man-is omniscient and omnipotent. But while the concept of an indefinable and indescribable God was the negation of idolatry and narcissism, God soon became again an idol; man identified himself with God in a narcissistic manner, and thus, in full contradiction to the original function of the concept of God, religion became a manifestation of group narcissism".
- (Rosenzweig 1979, p. 791): "Not just the categorical imperative, also the categorical indicative is pagan" (my translation).
- The idea that life (i.e., biology) is "the good" (i.e., the moral good) is not self-evident philosophically nor psychologically. For example, Socrates' decision to die is justified in Plato's philosophy. In psychology, for example, the pleasure obtained from the death drive (the Thanatic pleasure from the symptom) in Freud's approach challenges the positive correlation between biology and ethics. Humanism holds that humans are fundamentally rational, whereas the prevailing viewpoint in Judaism is that human beings are inherently good (see Ben-Pazi 2023, pp. 26–28). Combining these methods, nontheistic mysticism (and humanistic religion in general) acknowledges that rationality and a priori reason are insufficient on their own because they distance the human being from concrete reality. Friedman claims that "Fromm acted as his own clinician as well as a prophet for humankind" (L. Friedman 2013, p. 263; see Funk 2009, p. 51).

- My definition of atheism here follows (Baggini 2003): “Atheism [...] is the belief that there is no God or Gods. [...] Atheism contrasts not only with theism and other forms of belief in God, but also with agnosticism—the suspension of belief or disbelief in God” (pp. 3–4). “Atheists can be indifferent rather than hostile to religious belief” (p. 10). For Fromm, the problem with this definition lies in the terms belief and faith. Even in the years when he lived a religious lifestyle, he emphasized that, in Judaism, there is no [divine] commandment to believe (Fromm 2022, p. 13). The tendency to present Fromm as an atheist (e.g., Pöhlmann 1991, pp. 133–34), is, in my opinion, a mistake. It should be noted that Pöhlmann focuses on *Das Christusbogma*, which is Fromm’s psychoanalytic–social analysis of the development of the religious dogma in Christianity. The important point is that Fromm believed it was essential to describe human history and the mental and social reality with religious concepts. This does not confirm that he believed in the existence of a transcendent deity or a God (as a creator, revealer, and source of morality, etc.), but it also does not make Fromm an atheist, rather a humanist religionist.
- Stanley Glen argues that Fromm’s religion is “mystical atheism”, and claims that even though Fromm “is in revolt against the patriarchal aspect of the faith of his fathers, against its conception of the ‘otherness’ of God (transcendence) and of the sacred law that arises out of it, he still seeks its authentication” (Glen 1966, p. 23).
- The idea that God is a symbol of the “highest value” and, as such, constitutes a point of orientation for the moral development of humanity is very central to modern Jewish philosophies that react to Kantian ethics. (Fromm [1956] 2006, p. 59): “In all theistic religions, whether they are polytheistic or monotheistic, God stands for the highest value, the most desirable good. [...] I myself do not think in terms of a theistic concept, and that to me the concept of God is only a historically conditioned one, in which man has expressed his experience of his higher powers, his longing for truth and for unity at a given historical period. But I also believe that the consequences of strict monotheism and a non-theistic ultimate concern with the spiritual reality are two views which, though different, need not fight each other” (Fromm [1956] 2006, p. 67).
- Fromm writes that Hermann Cohen pointed out that “the ethical qualities of God (midot), enumerated in Exodus 34: 6–7, have been transformed into norms for human action” (Fromm [1966] 1969, p. 54).
- (Fromm 2000, pp. 98–99): “The dialogue between religious theists and religious non-theists is in the somewhat difficult position of not having a suitable language because, for 2000 years, all concepts have been oriented toward western religions, especially toward Christianity. That is why, for example, the study of Buddhism is of such great interest: it is a religion that is non-theistic, that knows no god, and that nevertheless essentially accords very closely with Christian and Jewish mysticism. The comparison of a mystic like Meister Eckhart with certain Buddhist texts evinces a nearly complete agreement. Indeed, I believe that there is no disagreement between theistic-religious people and non-theistic-religious people, that there should be no disagreement, and that both should act according to the principle of understanding the other person’s points, one should, on the contrary, first see one’s own weak points. [...] Yet both groups have essentially the same basic position that is nevertheless incompatible with the position of idolatry, which is the position of the great majority within as well as outside religion”.
- (Fromm [1947] 1971b, pp. 199–210). He considers faith to be a character trait without which we would be doomed to relativism and uncertainty (Wilde 2004, p. 46). Fromm connects mysticism with the being mode of faith, where a person is said to be in faith rather than to have faith (Fromm [1976] 2008, pp. 35–36).
- In this context, it is possible to take into account the “social unconscious” according to Fromm, which connects religion (as a cultural–social condition) and psychoanalysis. If we accept the assumption that contradictions are repressed to the unconscious—namely that, according to Fromm, the human being is “partly divine, partly animal; partly infinite, partly finite” (Fromm [1955] 1991, p. 24; see there, pp. 118–19), then we can argue that the condition of the “religious” person includes suppressed secular elements, and alternatively, the condition of the “secular” person includes suppressed religious elements. We should remember that for Fromm, “there is no one without a religious need” (Fromm [1950] 1955, p. 25). Hence, a nontheistic mystical perspective is an intermediate view that allows an orientation beyond cultural influences (religious and secular), but at the same time is not morally relativistic, as it is based on the idea and experience of unity.
- On Fromm’s and Cohen’s origin of reason, see (Pinkas 2020, p. 155).
- (Fromm [1976] 2008, p. 163; Funk 1982, p. 115). And see (Fromm [1968] 2010, p. 142): “In fact this new humanism is a return to the message of the Prophets who did not preach the belief in God, but that people should do God’s will—and what is God’s will? [...] What new spiritual forms, symbols and rituals will arise cannot be predicted. They will probably not be theistic in the traditional sense, but will share the experience for which God, Nirvana, are poetic symbols”. And see (Fromm [1955] 1991, p. 172). It should be noted that from the second half of the twentieth century onward, the term “spirituality”, and not mysticism, challenged the binary distinction between the religious and secular realms of life. See (Huss 2014, pp. 47–60). Huss argues that contemporary spirituality challenges the division created in the modern era between the religious and secular realms of life and enables the formation of new lifestyles, social practices, and cultural artifacts that cannot be defined as either religious or secular.
- It is important to remember that, for Fromm, the distinction between authoritarian and humanistic religion “cuts across the distinction between theistic and nontheistic [...] The essential element in authoritarian religion and in the authoritarian religious experience is the surrender to a power transcending man. The main virtue of this type of religion is obedience, its cardinal sin is disobedience. [...] Humanistic religion, on the contrary, is centered around man and his strength. Man must develop his power of reason in order to understand himself, his relationship to his fellow men and his position in the universe. [...] The prevailing mood

is that of joy, while the prevailing mood in authoritarian religion is that of sorrow and of guilt” (Fromm [1950] 1955, pp. 34–37; Fromm [1976] 2008, p. 110).

52 Fromm states that “only by being in touch with the idol” can the individual try to be in touch with himself (Fromm 1992, p. 42). That is, his nontheism can be seen as a way “to be in touch” with his own idol and himself.

53 There is no single accepted definition of the term humanism. For example, according to the Collins dictionary, humanism is the belief that people can achieve happiness and live well without religion https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/humanism#google_vignette (accessed on 24 April 2024). According to the Oxford dictionary, humanism is “A philosophy or ethical system that centers on the concept of the dignity, freedom, and value of human beings. The belief that there is an essential human condition that emerges regardless of historical circumstance and that this can be used as the basis for developing an understanding of the past”. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20111017141751899> (accessed on 24 April 2024).

54 See, e.g., (Durkin 2014, p. 7). And see there in the introduction, concerning Fromm’s differentiation between “radical humanism”—which is revolutionary, prophetic, and seeks to go to the root—and “normative humanism”, which is essential to a sane society. Later, Durkin added the “interpersonal humanism” type to Frommian humanism in “In Defense of Fromm’s Humanism in the 21st Century”, a lecture given at the Erich Fromm’s Study Center, Berlin, October 2023.

55 For Fromm, humanism is close to medical science because it is based on a seemingly arbitrary principle: that life is better than death (this can be philosophically debated, specifically in bioethics under the topic of “end-of-life decisions”). The arbitrariness is demonstrated, for example, by a researcher in the medical sciences who sets out to confirm this hypothesis by finding a cure that prolongs life. It can be argued, though not without a hint of absurdity, that when a scientist discovers what he set out to discover in the first place, he jeopardizes the validity of his research (see Evans 1966, p. 81). Accordingly, the humanistic orientation has guiding principles, a desired reality, and ways to achieve it.

56 (Fromm 1994, p. 68). In 1962 Fromm states that the most important of all humanist thinkers of the 18th and 19th centuries is Goethe, who expressed the idea that the human being “carry in himself not only his individuality but all humanity with all its potentialities”. It is interesting to note that Rabbi Nehemiah Noble taught Goethe and humanism at the Jewish Lehrhaus in Frankfurt (see Meir 2002, pp. 97–107). Fromm’s friend, Ernst Simon, also published an article in 1951 on Goethe’s humanism, which he identifies as religious humanism in contrast to, for example, Sartre’s anti-religious humanism (Simon 1951, pp. 86–103).

57 According to Buber, the main difference between humanism and a “believing humanism” concerns the importance of dialogue. In believing humanism, the encounter between the human being and God outlines the model for the crucial importance of the encounter between humans (see Ben-Pazi 2023, p. 64).

58 Leibowitz (1903–1994) sharply distinguishes between the religious system of values and the humanistic-non-theistic system. For example, he writes, “Morality as guidance of man’s will in accordance with his knowledge of nature and of himself (the Stoics; Spinoza), or in accordance with what the individual considers his duty toward man as an end-in-himself (Kant), differs radically from religious consciousness or religious feeling” (Leibowitz 1992, p. 6). Kasher argues that although Leibowitz declared that he was not a humanist, his method and decisions that correspond to humanism (mainly in matters of medical ethics) characterize him as such, even if against his will (see Kasher 1998, pp. 19–29). Fromm probably did not know Leibowitz, who was known mainly in Israel, but he was aware of the relationship between religion and morality (a discourse widely conducted by Hermann Cohen). The demand to distinguish between religion and morality does not claim that a religious position is necessarily anti-humanist; on the contrary, the claim that humanist values are anchored in the commands of God—from a religious perspective—only strengthens their validity. In Cohen’s thought, when the love of one’s fellow man, or alternatively, the prohibition of murder—are God’s demands, then they become a “practical reason”. However, this position requires sensitivity to the use of language. The term radical humanism, in the case of Fromm, may falsely exclude religion from morality.

59 Fromm purges every element of national identity in his discussions of religion and Judaism. This is mostly evident in his discussions of the biblical Moses (see Pinkas 2022, p. 243). On the one hand, Fromm completely internalized the universal element of Cohen’s religion of reason; hence, for him, there is no contradiction between humanism and Judaism. Similarly to Cohen, who emphasized the contribution of Jewish monotheism to European humanism, Fromm also deals with the contribution of Judaism, but points towards the horizon of a new nontheistic humanistic religion. Fromm’s position differs from that of Ernst Simon and Martin Buber, who considered Jewish humanism as a concrete form of humanism that would be realized in Zionism (see Fromm [1966] 1969, pp. 66–69). Fromm characterizes Jewish nationalism as a natural means of compensation for being persecuted throughout the generations and emphasizes the universal elements in the Hebrew Bible and Rabbinic literature. It is important to note that for Buber, Zionism is “something other than Jewish nationalism. We rightly call ourselves Zionist and not Jewish nationalists. [...] Zion is something which once was to be and still is to become [...] the beginning of the kingdom of God over humankind” (Mendes-Flohr 1988, p. 22).

60 For example, Levinas in “For a Jewish Humanism” (published 1956) declares that “Monotheism is a humanism. Only simpletons made it into a theological arithmetic” (in Levinas 1997, p. 275). Paul Mendes-Flohr dealt with the Jewish origins of postmodern humanism and its principles among 20th century Jewish thinkers (e.g., Mendes-Flohr 2006, pp. 369–77; and see Fisher 2019).

- 61 He writes, “Does God intervene in the historical process? No. Man is left to himself and makes his own history; God helps but never by changing man’s nature, by doing what only man can do for himself. To put it in my own nontheistic language: man is left to himself, and nobody can do for him what he is unable to do for and by himself” (Fromm [1966] 1969, p. 74).
- 62 About the “Psychospiritual renewal”, see (Fromm [1968] 2010, pp. 137–42).
- 63 As a response to trans-humanism, which promotes the process of perfecting humanity (for example, with the claim that AI will complete humanity and raise it to the level of a superior race and half-god, as is Noah Harari’s position), Hietalahti emphasizes that, according to Fromm, humanity’s perfection is not technological but ethical. Against post-humanism (which argues against anthropocentrism and the lack of regard for nature, etc.), Hietalahti shows that according to Fromm, the essence of the human being is paradoxical: it is part of nature but also transcends it. He concludes that, according to Frommian humanism, human beings engage in an enduring ethical process as individuals and as societies. Human beings are not rational and isolated; rather, they are interwoven in relationships, which also extend to the non-human environment. The conclusions of Hietalahti’s research indicate, in my opinion, the importance of researching the Jewish sources of Fromm’s “need for relatedness”.
- 64 See (Pinkas 2023). At the Free School of Jewish Learning in Frankfurt, Fromm also met Gershom Scholem and Martin Buber. Scholem was still in the early stages of his research on Kabbalah, while Buber, at this stage of his life, had already delved into the “I and thou” dialogical approach and less into mysticism.
- 65 (Heuberger 2007, p. 10, and especially on p. 28). Notwithstanding their opposing viewpoints on Zionism, Nobel and Hermann Cohen kept a close friendship. Nobel’s viewpoint on Judaism was significantly affected by Cohen’s *Religion of Reason*.
- 66 Fromm’s understanding of mysticism echoes the way in which Cohen understands the striving for “God’s nearness”, as a longing to get closer to the good. Cohen’s method stresses the reciprocity between God and humans; however, this *correlation* only has ethical significance. For Cohen, mysticism illustrated a departure from the religion of reason (Cohen [1919] 1995, pp. 163–64). For Fromm, as we have seen, “Rational thinking, which is free from assumption, ends in mysticism”, and mysticism is “the logical consequence of theology”. Namely, for Fromm, mysticism does not stand in contradiction with reason, as it does for Cohen.
- 67 Gershom Scholem describes Rabinkow as “The Jew of Heidelberg in those years [...] a perfect embodiment of a representative of the oral teaching. [...] A master of the Talmud from a Hasidic family, who internally brought together the system of the Baal Shem-Tov with the system of Hermann Cohen, his philosophical hero. [...] He was strict in observance of the commandments, possessed of a free spirit and an open heart—the appearance of a great teacher” (in Pinkas 2023, pp. 9–10).
- 68 The handwritten dissertation, *Das Jüdische Gesetz: Zur Soziologie des Diaspora-Judentums* (1922), was first published in 1989. The first English translation is from 2022.
- 69 (Fromm 2022, p. 111). From the position of an observant Jew, Fromm, in his socio-historical research, was critical of Kabbalistic and mystical-messianic approaches—for example, those of Sabbatai Zevi and Jacob Frank, which abolish the Halachic law (Fromm 2022, p. 124). Fromm distinguishes between ecstatic mysticism and the social mysticism of Hasidism. Regarding the former, he is very critical (as is Hermann Cohen), but is positive regarding the latter. “Hasidism was not an ascetic movement, but rather a movement guided by the principle of serving God in joy. [...] This existential knowledge [Erkenntnis] is not acquired through learning [Wissen], but rather through immersing oneself in one’s own inner world, through contemplation. Learning that only sharpens the intellect must therefore yield to prayer and joyful gatherings” (Fromm 2022, p. 113).
- 70 In his published essay “The Individual and Society in Judaism” (in Jung 1987, pp. 131–55), Rabinkow emphasizes the democratic and humanistic aspects of Jewish education while criticizing mysticism. “[The] firm adherence to the law keeps the Jew, in spite of all his self-consciousness, from the deviation of an empty individualism and above all from the most dangerous of all selfishness: religious egotism. The method of juridical treatment of all problems of cult and ritual, familiar to one who has enjoyed Jewish education from early youth, immunizes him against mysticism. For him even the most sacred ritual acts are governed and controlled by logical standards and by history-oriented rationality. Therefore, enthusiastic followers of mysticism and superstition are [rarely] found [among the Jews]” (ibid., p. 150). This article was first published in German in 1929 and is Rabinkow’s only publication.
- 71 Fromm quotes from Buber’s writings on Hasidism: *Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman*, published in 1906; *Die Legende des BaalShem*, published in 1907; *Geist und Leib der chassidischen Bewegung*, published in 1922 as introduction to *Der große Maggid und seine Nachfolge* and from Simon Dubnow, *Die neueste Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes*, published in 1920.
- 72 Fromm added that “This profound difference between Hasidic and Occidental mysticism is given far too little attention and emphasis by Buber” (Fromm 2022, p. 111).
- 73 (Fromm [1975] 1999a, pp. 34–36). He writes, “In the great philosophical or religious traditions [...] ethics is not a code of behavior. [...] [rather] ethics refers to a particular orientation which is rooted in man and which, therefore, is not valid in reference to this or that person or to this or that situation but to all human beings” (Fromm 2020, pp. 165–66).
- 74 (Fromm [1956] 2006, p. 30): “In mysticism, which is the consequent outcome of monotheism, the attempt is given up to know God by thought, and it is replaced by the experience of union with God in which there is no more room—and no need—for knowledge *about* God. The experience of union, with man, or religiously speaking, with God, is by no means irrational. On the contrary, it is as Albert Schweitzer has pointed out, the consequence of rationalism, its most daring and radical consequence. It is based on our knowledge of the fundamental, and not accidental, limitations of our knowledge. It is the knowledge that we shall never ‘grasp’ the secret of man and of the universe, but that we can know, nevertheless, in the act of love”.

- ⁷⁵ In *Man for Himself*, which is Fromm's most philosophical work (and less "religious"), he tried to combine the biblical-religious and the philosophical to support the claim that social psychoanalysis is indispensable to the development of ethical theory. There, the reference to mysticism is minor but important for understanding the development of his position. He claims that "there is much less difference between a mystic faith in God and an atheist's rational faith in mankind", and that the mystics in the Judeo-Christian religions understood that the creation of the human being in "God's image" transcends the authoritarian structure of religion (Fromm [1947] 1971b, p. 210).
- ⁷⁶ In his correspondence with Merton, Fromm stated that Karl Marx was propounding "a nontheistic mysticism like Zen Buddhism" that would overcome "the subject-object split", and thereby facilitate a deep "union between man and man, and man and nature" (L. Friedman 2013, p. 226; Fromm [1962] 1980, pp. 54–56). Thus, the similarity that Fromm saw between Marx's secular messianism and the nontheistic Zen Buddhism cannot be attributed to Merton.
- ⁷⁷ For Fromm, Eckhart expresses an existential development from Maimonides' thought. In *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides rejects pathos and personality in the experience of the individual and God. God is impersonal; he stopped interfering with his creation. Maimonides' approach, unlike Eckhart's, may lead to the impossibility of the mystical experience of unity with such a God.
- ⁷⁸ I am grateful to Paul Mendes-Flohr for encouraging me to look into the relationship between Fritz Mauthner and Fromm. This topic deserves more in-depth research than the brief introduction I offer here.
- ⁷⁹ Mauthner holds that it is superstitious to assume that there is a correspondence between the name and the thing it refers to. For example, "justice", "spirit", "God", and "causality" are all nouns, yet there is no existent thing or entity that corresponds to them. As for religion, the impersonal monotheism free of religious dogmas was, according to Mauthner, a solid basis for criticism of the "most holy concepts: God, freedom, and immortality" (Mauthner 1924, p. 13). That is, according to Mauthner, the main contribution of Jewish monotheism should be seen within the philosophy of language and the history of atheism rather than, for example, as Hermann Cohen believed, in the realm of moral socialism. According to Mauthner's method, the latter is merely the outcome of the former.
- ⁸⁰ Mauthner writes, "In one point monism and mysticism coincide: in a feeling of desire for unification and of becoming one. Of what? Of one's own Ego. With what? With the non-Ego. Such a monism, such a feeling-of-unity would have nothing to do with the inferior (explanations) of a materialism and it would cover reasonably well that which I have called, so as to have a word symbol [for it], *godless mysticism*" (Weiler 1970, pp. 225–26). For Mauthner, the main goal of language criticism is to alter the way we see and use language. On the one hand, language criticism is a skepticism that undermines the certainty of thought, and, on the other, language criticism enables the expression of a desire for unity between language and thought, and he calls this unity mysticism.
- ⁸¹ Fromm dealt with silence in his discussions on meditation and Zen Buddhism. For him, silence is not a departure from relationships and connecting; rather, it is essential to them. Silence is a condition and state of consciousness that allows for the real connection—the weight of the dialogic responsibility of listening.
- ⁸² A similar criticism appears in Helen Lynd's *On Shame and the Search for Identity* (1958): "Fromm, and even Sullivan at times, seem to assume that there is an already existent real or true or spontaneous self which can be evoked into active existence almost at will. [...] But, like understanding of "reality", such a real self is something to be discovered and created, not a given, but a lifelong endeavor" (M. Friedman 1964, p. 401). Durkin demonstrates that the essentialism underlying Fromm's radical humanism is justified, reasonable, and crucial to its success, enabling him to avoid the excesses of extreme relativism or absolute essentialism (Durkin 2014, p. 9).

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