# Idolatry and Freedom: Erich Fromm's View[1]

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> So long as the human beings remain free, they strive for
> nothing so incessantly and so painfully as to find someone to worship.
> (F. M. Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov)

Gershom Scholem once said that "Max Horkheimer's *Institut für Sozialforschung* [is one of the] most remarkable 'Jewish sects' that German Jewry produced" (Scholem 1980: 131). Apart from obvious biographical references and ironic exaggeration, this assertion is actually not far from the truth if one considers that interactions between Jewish thought and the intellectual profile of the *Frankfurter Schule* can be appreciated at many levels in the theories of the school's major exponents. The interaction modes can be broken down into two main types, or, better put, the intersection dynamics can follow two opposite directions. Concepts, motifs, and ideas coming from Jewish sources undergo a process of theoretical adaptation to then find application to secular contexts,[2] but the opposite is also possible, and thinking processes elaborated in the context of dialectic and critical theory are used as keys to the reading of Jewish phenomena. In short, Jewish thought can contribute to philosophical reflections,

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2 A significant example in this sense is the revival of the biblical ban on images (*Bilderverbot*), which, through a process of secularization, plays a central role for several exponents of the *Frankfurter Schule*. Cf. Lars Tittmar's and Mario Cosimo Schmidt's chapters in this volume.

but the contrary also holds, and philosophical reflections can shed new light on issues in Jewish thought.

This latter case is very well epitomized by Erich Fromm's considerations about the dialectical nature of human freedom (Fromm 1941) and the key role these play in his later interpretation of the Jewish view of idolatry (Fromm 1966). These two main topics, examined in two works, also determine the configuration of this chapter, which is accordingly divided into two main parts. A reconstruction of the dialectical structure that Fromm recognizes in the dynamics of human freedom, in the first part, will serve as a basis to show how idolatry can be interpreted as a moment of this dialectic in the second. More precisely, idolatry can be included in the dialectic of freedom as its negative moment, one of the preeminent examples of what Fromm calls "escapes from freedom."

While there is a general consensus that idolatry has to be rejected, a common definition of its features and a shared understanding of what is wrong with it are far from being reached. In fact, idolatry has been condemned for many different reasons over the centuries: because it corresponds to an act of treachery, because it is associated with lechery, promiscuity, and immorality, or because it constitutes a category mistake, to name but a few examples. In this regard, Fromm's specific contribution to the debate consists in reading idolatry through the prism of freedom dynamics as a *regressive* moment in the course of human liberation. Abolishing idolatrous ways of thinking and acting is thus required, in Fromm's view, to allow for the full development of the human being.

## The Dialectic of Freedom

The dialectical nature of human freedom is the cornerstone around which Fromm's reflections in his 1941 book *Escape of Freedom* revolve. As he himself declares in the preface,

> it is the thesis of this book that [the] modern human being, freed from the bonds of pre-individualistic society, which simultaneously gave her security and limited her, has not gained freedom in the positive sense of the realiza-

> tion of her individual self; that is, the expression of her intellectual, emotional and sensuous potentialities. (Fromm 1941: viii)[3]

The connections Fromm recognizes between security and limitations lead him to develop a view in which every step taken toward freedom implies a sense of uncertainty that confronts the human being with two alternative paths: the first leads to new forms of dependence and submission, the second to a higher dimension of freedom.

Along the first path, the human striving for freedom ends up being converted into its opposite, thus giving rise to a vicious circle of liberation and subjection; along the second, a possibility of breaking this circle is recognized in a radical change in the way in which freedom is conceived – that is, from negative to positive freedom, in Fromm's own terms. "Negative" freedom means the mere overcoming of limitations, a reactive drive to liberation *from something* constraining. But freedom can also develop into an active principle, into spontaneity, free expression, creativity, and the full realization of the individual. This is freedom *to do something*, "positive" freedom, which resists being caught up in a dialectical movement and is even able to stop it.

Thus, the path leading to a vicious circle is not unavoidable, and an alternative exists – as Fromm says:

> Does our analysis lend itself to the conclusion that there is an inevitable circle that leads from freedom into new dependence? Does freedom from all primary ties make the individual so alone and isolated that inevitably she must escape into new bondage? Are independence and freedom identical with isolation and fear? Or is there a state of positive freedom in which the individual exists as an independent self and yet is not isolated but united with the world, with other human beings, and nature? We believe that there is a positive answer. (ibid: 257)

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3 The generic use of masculine nouns and pronouns was standard practice in the patriarchal perspective of the time when Fromm's books were published, in 1941 and 1966. The same remark, moreover, can be made about other texts considered here. In this essay, however, gender-inclusive language has been adopted. This means that a gender-neutral alternative has been used whenever the masculine form appears in the quoted passages with a general meaning. Thus, such terms as "man" and "mankind" have been substituted with "human being" and "humankind." Finally, the pronouns used to refer to them are "she" and "her".

Both the circle and its rupture lend themselves to being schematized in terms of different developmental moments or stages. The circle is made up of three moments that deserve the adjective "dialectical," as they give rise to a typically dialectical process governed by the contradictory dynamics of opposite poles that lead to one another. On the other hand, the rupture of the circle can be seen as a fourth moment. Calling it "anti-dialectical" is thus particularly appropriate for highlighting its ability to interrupt the succession of the previous phases.

The first dialectical moment corresponds to a primordial condition in which the human being is still completely embedded in nature as a part of it and thus entirely subject to its laws, entirely determined by natural necessity. For Fromm, this condition is characterized by the fundamental feeling of comfort and safety that can be provided by blind adherence to an established set of rules. However, *the highest degree of perceived safety is counterbalanced here by the lowest degree of freedom*.

It is precisely this lack of freedom that prompts a transition from the first to the second dialectical moment. From a state of comfortable but unconscious union with nature, the human being gradually detaches herself from natural necessity and attains a condition of conscious independence. But

> by being aware of herself as distinct from nature and other people, by being aware – even very dimly – of death, sickness, ageing, she necessarily feels her insignificance and smallness in comparison with the universe and all others who are not "she" […], she would feel like a particle of dust and be overcome by her individual insignificance. (ibid: 21)

In other words, the newly acquired freedom and independence come at the cost of an increasing sense of anxiety and uncertainty that makes this second moment the dialectical opposite of the first, as *the highest degree of freedom causes the degree of perceived safety to become lower and lower*.

At this juncture, a third moment takes shape as an attempt at a regression to the comfort and safety of the primary connections with nature. This, however, is an unsuccessful attempt, as regression, in this case, can never be complete and the lost unity can never be fully restored. The human being tries

> to give up her freedom and […] overcome her aloneness by eliminating the gap that has arisen between her individual self and the world. This […] course [, however,] never reunites her with the world in the way she was related to it

> before she emerged as an "individual," for the fact of her separateness cannot be reversed. (ibid: 140)[4]

The three moments analyzed thus far outline a circular path that can be schematized through the conceptual triad of "subjection–liberation–new subjection." However, two points must be considered in this scheme:

a) The delineated circle is not perfect, as the third phase can never fully coincide with the first and the loss of certainty is, to some extent, irreversible.
b) The last transition – from feeling the discomfort of freedom to seeking refuge in a new submission – is not necessary, and an alternative is possible that can break the circle and open a new way. This is supposed to lead to a new dimension that maintains freedom without falling into the anguish of uncertainty.

Different terms are used for this new dimension, which, thanks to its ability to interrupt the dialectical process, could be seen as a fourth anti-dialectical moment: "spontaneity," "productive work," "freedom to," or "love," for example, are some of the terminological choices made in the works considered here.

The dialectical scheme is then employed in Fromm's socio-psychological approach and applied to two levels that he considers parallel: the fields of *individual development* and *social dynamics*. Against the opposite extremes of Freud's and Durkheim's views,[5] Fromm assumes a continuous exchange between individual drives and social forces, explicitly stating that

> the human being is not only made by history – history is made by the human being. The resolution of this seeming contradiction constitutes the field of social psychology. Its task is to show not only how passions, desires, anxieties change and develop as a *result* of the social process, but also how human en-

4 The same remark is then repeated in other passages of the text, for example: "[The human being] is driven into new bondage. This bondage is different from the primary bonds, from which, though dominated by authorities or the social group, she was not entirely separated. The escape does not restore her lost security" (Fromm 1941: 257).

5 Freud and Durkheim are here presented as two opposite one-sided positions: while Freud tends to reduce the sociological dimension to purely psychological dynamics, Durkheim seems to aim at eradicating psychological aspects from sociology (cf. Fromm 1941: 14).

> ergies thus shaped into specific forms in their turn become *productive forces*, *molding the social process*. (ibid: 13–14)[6]

The *trait d'union* between these two levels is recognized in the process of individualization that, for Fromm, characterizes both. Chapter II, "The Emergence of the Individual and the Ambiguity of Freedom" (ibid: 24–39), is entirely devoted to elaborating on a parallel between "the social history of humankind" and "the life history of an individual" (ibid: 24), showing that both levels have the same dialectical character. They may be as different as *micro* and *macro*, but in spite of this, they share the same inner dynamics. In conducting his comparative analysis, Fromm starts by correlating the individual change from fetal into human existence with its counterpart in the history of humankind; that is, the emergence of the human being from a prehuman stage in which she is a piece of nature, completely controlled by instinctive and reflex action mechanism.

Once separated from the mother's body by the cutting of the umbilical cord, the child starts to experience a world outside itself and forms a vague intuition of "otherness." The child begins to perceive itself as a separate independent entity, and this perception is the *one* cause that – dialectically – gives rise to *two* contradictory trends (ibid: 104): on the one hand, the process of individuation implies a growth in physical, emotional, and mental strength, but on the other, it has the negative side effect of a growing feeling of aloneness. The more freedom and independence are acquired through individuation, the more aloneness, powerlessness, and consequent anxiety are produced as side effects. As a result of this double process, the individual develops an impulse to reject individuality as the main source of her anxiety. She is led to reverse the process and let go of the acquired freedom in order to shun the disadvantages it entails.

This new impulse lies at the roots of the second dialectical moment, but before we take this latter into account, it is worth noting that a path that is analogous to the first movement – the acquisition of freedom and its repercussions – can be recognized at a more general level in the evolution of humankind.

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6 In some passages, Fromm seems to think that the difference between psychological and social levels is just a matter of scale. For example, he says: "Any group consists of individuals and nothing but individuals, and psychological mechanisms which we find operating in a group can therefore only be mechanisms that operate in individuals. In studying individual psychology as a basis for the understanding of social psychology, we do something which might be compared with studying an object under the microscope. This enables us to discover the very details of psychological mechanism which we find operating on a large scale in the social process" (Fromm 1941: 137).

Just as a single individual acquires freedom by losing maternal protection, humankind emerges from a prehuman stage by leaving instinctual existence behind. Fromm considers a primordial phase in which the boundary between the animal and the human being is not neatly defined and all activities are still governed by instincts. The overcoming of instinctive drives and the opening of possibilities beyond the coercion of natural determination is what, in Fromm's view, characterizes freedom, and this marks the beginning of a lifeform that can be legitimately called "human." In other words, human existence begins as an act of liberation from natural necessity.

The acquisition of freedom, be it by way of separation from the maternal body or through emancipation from natural necessity, leads in both cases to a sense of aloneness that prompts a process of compensation and a tendency to find reassurance in new forms of submission. More precisely, the single individual, the child, tries to cope with the uncertainty of freedom by bowing to an adult authority (cf. ibid: 29–30). A similar reaction, though developed at a broader level, can be found in humankind and their search for safety through authoritarianism and conformism.[7] Despite their evident differences in scale, both processes have a common denominator in an attempt to reject individuation as a source of unease and find refuge in some form of authority that covers and suppresses individuality.

It is clear, however, that this kind of regression is tantamount to falling into a vicious circle, in which the goal of reestablishing the lost, reassuring pre-individual ties may be pursued but never fully reached, as the severed ties can never be completely restored. Nonetheless, as stated before, this continuous alternation of the acquisition and loss of freedom is not the only possible path: another way can be followed "that connects the individual with the world without eliminating her individuality" (ibid: 30). Obviously, the question arises as to how such apparently opposite features as "individuation" and "connection" can possibly be combined. Fromm's answer is very simple and extremely cryptic at the same time: "spontaneity" is the notion he introduces to indicate that new dimension that is supposed to break the dialectical process and lead out of its vicious circle, also adding that it consists in nothing else than the full realization of the human being, that is, in her "being herself."

7 For Fromm, authoritarianism and conformism represent the two main forms of escape from freedom: "The principal social avenues of escape in our time are the submission to a leader, as has happened in Fascist countries, and the compulsive conforming as is prevalent in our own democracy" (Fromm 1941: 134).

A first step toward delineating *spontaneous* activity is taken by contrasting it to its opposite – to *compulsive* activity. The conceptual pair "external–internal" can be useful to clarify this point. Thus, compulsive activity can be said to be "external" because it is based on a pattern coming from the outside as something given, imposed, uncritically accepted, and, broadly speaking, something to be aligned to. In contrast, spontaneous activity can be considered "internal" in the sense that it has its origin only in itself, without resorting to any pre-established model to follow.

However, the nature of "spontaneity" emerges far more easily from some concrete examples taken from the realm of human activity than it does from an abstract, theoretical definition. In this regard, Fromm concentrates on two main fields: love and creative work. These have a paradigmatic value, as "what holds true of love and work holds true of all spontaneous action" (ibid: 261), and both are able to forge connections without dissolving individuality. Love presupposes and maintains the polarity of the individual self and otherness, without one of the two poles being reduced to the other. Creative work shows the same polarity, but between the individual and the world in which she lives. The creative human being affirms herself in activity, but, by connecting the creator to the focus of her creative power, she affirms the otherness of nature at the same time. This peculiar capability of love, creativity, and spontaneity allows Fromm to conclude that "the birth of individuality and the pain of aloneness is dissolved on a higher plane by human spontaneous action" (ibid: 261).

The following notions appear to be particularly clarifying when summarizing Fromm's view of the dialectical circle of freedom and its anti-dialectical breaking. The first notion is "unaware submission," from which "negative freedom" is then achieved. This latter represents a decisive turning point from which two opposite ways can be followed: on the one hand, "negative freedom" can lead back to a new form of submission; on the other, there is also a chance that the negative will be converted into the positive, the reactive into the active. Thus, the level of "positive freedom" can finally be reached, and with it the full realization of the human being.

## The Dialectic of Freedom, with a Jewish Inflection

About 20 years after Fromm's reflections on the dialectical nature of freedom, he revived and employed these notions in his "radical interpretation of the Old Testament" – which he makes no bones about calling "a revolutionary book"

(Fromm 1966: 7). The dynamics that Fromm analyzes in relation to freedom find close correspondence in the steps that constitute the history of the Jewish people. And this correspondence is corroborated by the fact that for Fromm, the Old Testament too has no other goal than liberation in the broadest sense of the term: "freedom for the individual, the nation, and for all of humankind" (ibid: 7). In this view, then, the history of the Jewish people can be seen as a progressive acquisition of freedom, which, as such, is subject to falling into pitfalls that are analogous to those delineated for freedom in general.

More precisely, the three dialectical moments of freedom, along with the fourth anti-dialectical way out of the vicious circle of liberation and submission, correlate with some of the most salient events in Jewish history: the slavery in Egypt, for example, represents the first dialectical moment, the starting phase of submission from which the process of liberation begins; the exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt represents the first – and thus also naïve – movement of liberation: "freedom from," in Fromm's terminology, which bears within itself a sense of uncertainty and the constant risk of falling into other forms of subjection. The risk then becomes reality in the biblical episode of the golden calf, which Fromm – along with many other interpreters[8] – sees as a relapse into a submissive *forma mentis*.

Following the same reasoning as for freedom in general, however, the liberation from Egypt does not necessarily lead back to the idolatry of the golden calf. Relapse into idolatry, in other words, is not unavoidable. According to the dynamics explained above, an evolutionary path toward positive freedom, "freedom to," spontaneity, is also possible – and, in the biblical context, this would lead to what can be called "godlikeness." This refers to a condition in which the human being can and must become *like* God; she has the task of acquiring and practicing "the main qualities that characterize God: justice and love" (ibid: 65).

After the liberation from Egypt – that is, negative freedom, "freedom from" – it was as if the Jewish people had come to a crossroads: on the one hand, the relapse into subjection, represented through the idolatry of the golden calf; on the other, the achievement of positive freedom, freedom to, in the form of the full development of human nature, up until the achievement of godlikeness. Thus conceived, idolatry turns out to be one of the major forms of escape from

8 The biblical episode of the golden calf has been the object of several studies. Without any claim to completeness, some of the most recent and relevant are Bori 1990, Mosès 1985, Freedberg 1989, Assmann 2000, and Freudenthal 2012.

freedom – to the point that it can even act as a paradigm for any other form. But if idolatry has a paradigmatic value for other moves away from freedom, then these can be considered "idolatrous" in a metaphorical sense of the term – as Fromm himself suggests by distinguishing between primitive (i.e., literal) and modern (i.e., metaphorical) idols:[9] "The history of humankind up to the present time is primarily the history of idol worship, from the primitive idols of clay and wood to the modern idols of the state, the leader, production and consumption" (ibid: 43).

The use of the same notion of "idolatry" to describe phenomena that can be very different from one another can be justified based on their being characterized by the same dynamics, which, in this case, consist in a two-phase process: a combination of "alienation" and "projection." The human being tries to separate herself from – that is, she tries to *alienate* – the freedom that has become unbearable and ascribes it to – or, in other words, *projects* it onto – something external, which, invested with new powers, ascends to the status of "idol." Essentially, Fromm describes a process of displacement:

> The human being transfers her own passions and qualities to the idol. The more she impoverishes herself, the greater and stronger becomes the idol. The idol is the alienated form of the human self-experience. In worshipping the idol, the human being worships herself. (ibid: 43–44)

An idol is a thing, a repository of those qualities – freedom, in particular – that the human being perceives as difficult and oppressive. Projecting them onto something external, something non-human, may have a relieving effect, but the alienated qualities cannot be completely severed from the human being, who constantly feels the need to keep in touch with them: "If the idol is the alienated manifestation of human powers, and if the way to be in touch with these powers is a submissive attachment to the idol, it follows that idolatry is necessarily incompatible with freedom and independence." (ibid: 46)[10] In this view, then, idolatry is a form of escape from the unbearable uncertainty of

9 The problem of distinguishing the literal and metaphorical use of the term "idolatry" has been dealt with by Fackenheim (1973) and Fortis (2023b).

10 An explanation of these dynamics can be found in Nietzsche's reflections on the origin of religious cults: "One will think first of that mildest kind of constraint, that constraint one exercises when one has gained the affection of someone. It is thus also possible to exercise a constraint on the powers ·of nature through prayers and pleadings, through submission, through engaging regularly to give presents and offerings, through flat-

freedom toward the reassuring and comforting submission to a force or entity whose freedom can be influenced. In other words, the direct responsibility of freedom, which generates anxiety, is exchanged for the possibility of indirectly affecting, and possibly controlling, a free force.

The anxiety of freedom, and the consequent attempt to cope with it by creating and worshipping an idol, is expressed in narrative form in the biblical episode of the golden calf. The conditions are well-known: Moses has been lingering for too long on Mount Sinai and the Israelites begin to mourn the loss of their intermediary with God.[11]

> God knew how much the Hebrews longed for visible symbols; it was no longer enough for them to be led by a God who had no name, who was not represented visibly. […]. The people felt relatively secure as long as he [Moses], the powerful leader, the miracle worker, the feared authority, was present. Once he is absent, even for only a few days, they are gripped again with the fear of freedom. They long for another reassuring symbol. (ibid: 111)

From this passage, two points may be deduced that can be summarized under the conceptual label of "graduality." The human evolution from submission to freedom is not a direct one, in Fromm's view, but a gradual transition that needs to go through an intermediate phase of *partial* detachment from slavery before reaching *complete* freedom. More precisely, this middle position manifests itself in the *obedience* that the Israelites still need to render to God as well as in the *visual symbol* that they cannot give up yet. Both obedience and visual symbols show the advantages and disadvantages of intermediate elements, which can certainly ease the progression from the starting point to the end of a process, but make a relapse into the initial submissive condition all the more likely.

Fromm writes: "Against our thesis that the Jewish aim for the human being is independence and freedom, the objection may be raised that the Bible […]

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tering glorifications, inasmuch as by doing so one obtains their affection: love binds and is bound" (Nietzsche 1986: § 111, 64).

11 The passage from the Torah reads: "When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron and said to him, 'Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that fellow Moses – the man who brought us from the land of Egypt – we do not know what has happened to him'" (Ex. 32: 1).

requires obedience" (ibid: 72). However, the objection can be overruled by remarking that obedience, though not the final goal, is nonetheless an essential step toward reaching it: "Obedience to rational authority is the path that facilitates the breaking up of […] fixation to pre-individual archaic forces" (ibid: 73). Since it is impossible to go directly from submission to complete freedom,[12] the path of liberation must be divided into at least two segments: a first segment leads from a condition of slavery[13] to obedience to God, while a second is supposed to overcome obedience completely, leading to fully mature freedom.

As to the human need for visible symbols, Fromm does not go into much detail, but in the history of thought, it is not uncommon to acknowledge a close connection between a tentative definition of the human being and the notion of "symbol."[14] In these views, the human experience in the world is always mediated, and the mediation takes place through the creation and employment of symbols. For example, by applying the notion of "symbolizing being" to the episode of the golden calf, Stéphane Mosès (1985) describes the absence of the biblical Moses as a traumatizing experience that left the Israelites in the agony of living without the sense that had been guaranteed by Moses' visibility and mediation up to that point. The senselessness caused by such an unexpected loss of orientation in the world is then the trigger for idolatry. Without Moses, the Israelites feel the urge to find a replacement and think that they can find it in the golden statue of a calf.

From a more general perspective, obedience to authority and visual reference contribute to keeping contact with an idolatrous way of thinking, in order to make it easier and less traumatic to overcome. But in so doing, they do not sever the link with the previous mentality and thus expose themselves to the constant risk of relapsing into it. The episode of the golden calf testifies precisely to the actualization of this risk, as the core of its sinful meaning, the

12 Fromm explicitly says that "revolution [toward freedom] can succeed only in steps in time. [And] since there is no miraculous change of heart, each generation can take only one step" (Fromm 1966: 113).

13 In this context, "slavery" can be considered both the condition of captivity that the Jewish people suffered in the land of Egypt and the submissive attitude toward idols represented by Egyptian religion and culture.

14 The anthropological value of symbolization has been emphasized by several thinkers in the 20th century. Two particularly telling examples are Ernst Cassirer's conception of the human being as *animal symbolicum* (Cassirer 1944) and Hans Jonas' attempt to define the human being through the notion of *homo pictor* (Jonas 1962).

roots of its idolatrous essence, can be found in the persistence of a submissive *forma mentis* and the visual symbols this still requires.

The relapse into idolatry represented in the biblical episode of the golden calf is thus due to the process of the liberation of humankind being incomplete. For Fromm, obedience to God only partially emancipates humankind from its original condition, but the fact that the authority of God is a *rational* one – as opposed to the *irrational* ties to natural forces – can still be considered an advancement along the path of liberation. Similarly, Moses' role as a visual symbol testifies to a still-incomplete separation from the visual nature of idolatry, but despite this incompleteness, it must be remarked that Moses, in providing mediation between God and the Jewish people, is a *living* visual symbol. And this is certainly an improvement compared to the false mediation of an idol, whose essence, Fromm says, consists in being something *dead* (cf. ibid: 44–46).

If read through the prism of the dialectic of freedom, the conditions allowing a regression to idolatry correspond to the second dialectical moment; that is, to what Fromm calls "freedom *from*." But whereas the partial, negative "freedom *from*" can trigger a backward movement, it is equally true that this idolatrous regression is not necessary: it is just one among other potential outcomes, and alternative developments are possible. In fact, "freedom *from* may eventually lead to freedom *to* a new life without idolatry" (ibid: 113), or, to put it differently, negative freedom can also act as an intermediate step to reach positive freedom – which in the biblical context takes shape in terms of *godlikeness*.

In various passages, Fromm reaffirms the same concept: for example, he says that the main human task consists in emulating divine features (cf. ibid: 65), also adding that "the human being is not God, but if she acquires God's qualities, she is not beneath God, but walks *with* him" (ibid: 66) and concluding that "the human being can become *like* God, but she cannot become God" (ibid: 68). Fromm's conception of godlikeness, as the main task assigned to humankind, has its theoretical foundations in three main points, each of which is substantiated by the textual analysis of some Torah verses. The conception of the human being as *tselem Elohim* (צֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים, *image of God*), for example, is the basis of the human-divine analogy.[15] The notion of "openness," as Fromm's key to his reading of Genesis, lays the foundation for his idea of the human being as something that is still incomplete and aiming to become *like* God. Finally, the primacy of action over theory, which Fromm upholds by referring to Hermann

15 On the notion of God's image, cf. Lorberbaum 2015.

Cohen,[16] provides an insight into the *way* through which the human being can come closer to the divine ideal.

Gn. 1: 26–27 establishes the deepest analogy between God and the human being, which is described as *tselem Elohim* (צֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים, *image of God*). Following the biblical narration, then, Fromm also notes that after eating from the tree of knowledge (Gn. 3: 22–23), the divine-human affinity becomes even more accentuated, to the extent that "only mortality distinguishes [the human being] from God" (Fromm 1966: 64). In this view, the human being comes to be conceived as a sort of still *immature* form of the divine, entrusted with the task of reaching *maturity* and becoming *like* God. The human being is potentially and temporally what God is in a fully accomplished form and outside of time. But beyond this enormous difference, the viability of the human path toward the divine is guaranteed by the affinity implied in the expression *tselem Elohim* (צֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים, *image of God*).

A second aspect of the biblical conception of human nature may also be inferred from a philological remark. Referring to an unspecified Hasidic master, Fromm points out that "God does not say that 'it was good' after creating the human being" (ibid: 70). It is well known that the phrase "and God saw that this was good" (Gn. 1: 10, 12, 18, 25) can be found as a refrain concluding the various steps of creation, but the fact that the creation of the human being is an exception to this trend is, for Fromm, an argument in favor of the incomplete nature of humankind: "This indicates that while the cattle and everything else was finished after being created, the human being was not finished." (Fromm 1966: 70) From a theoretical point of view, it is worth noting that incompleteness is the main prerequisite for freedom. It is precisely because she is *incomplete* – that is, open to a development whose limits are not established in her nature once and for all – that the human being can be said to be *authentically free*.[17]

The third remark provides an answer as to *how* the human being can pursue the ideal of godlikeness. The Torah passages of relevance here are Ex. 34: 6[18] and Lv. 11: 44,[19] which Fromm considers through the mediation of Hermann

16 The central role of praxis in Judaism is investigated in Hermann Cohen's *Religion of Reason* (1995), especially in chapters VI and VII.

17 The same conception is then repeated in chapter VI of Fromm's book (Fromm 1966: 180).

18 "A God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness" (Ex. 34: 6).

19 "You shall sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I am holy" (Lv. 11: 44).

Cohen's interpretation.[20] For both Cohen and Fromm, it is not so much about *being* like God as it is about *acting* like him. By elucidating his understanding of *holiness* – which can be considered the Cohenian counterpart of Fromm's godlikeness – Cohen accounts for its divine and human inflections by resorting to the notions of "being" and "doing" respectively: "Holiness thus means a task for the human being, whereas for God it designates being" (Cohen 1995: 96). The same notion – that is, holiness – has an ontological meaning when referring to God, as it characterizes his essential traits, but acquires a practical connotation when referring to the human being, who has to *do* something to *achieve* the state in which God simply *is*. And, more precisely, what the human being has to do in order to come closer to Cohen's "holiness" or Fromm's "godlikeness" is to practice the divine precepts, following the law of God.[21]

These three aspects can thus be summarized as follows: 1) The human being's possibility of becoming like God is rooted in the notion of *tselem Elohim* (צֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים, *image of God*), which stands for an essential affinity between the human and the divine; 2) The incompleteness that characterizes the human being, moreover, allows her existence to take shape as the task of striving toward godlikeness, as being incomplete, without a predetermined form, is precisely what opens the space for human freedom; 3) Finally, the specific way through which the goal of godlikeness can be pursued is a practical one, which is dependent on interpretation and observance of the precepts. To illustrate the connection between the three main aspects of godlikeness as an alternative to idolatry, Fromm cites a famous episode narrated in the Talmud. This provides an example of what Fromm means by "being like God," while the anti-authoritative message that emerges from the text attests to its anti-idolatrous significance.

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20 According to Cohen, the features listed in the first verse (Ex. 34: 6) "are not so much characteristics of God, but rather conceptually determined models for the action of the human being" (Cohen 1995: 95). As to the second verse (Lv. 11: 44), Cohen says: "Human beings fulfill their striving for holiness in the acceptance of the archetypal holiness of God, in imitation of which they sanctify themselves" (ibid: 103).

21 Another Torah verse that is usually adduced in support of Judaism being based on praxis is Ex. 24: 7: "We will do and we will listen to all that God has declared." The way this verse is formulated suggests that the practical moment ("we will do") precedes the theoretical one ("we will listen to"). This lends itself to being interpreted as the affirmation of a primacy of praxis over theory. A prominent supporter of this reading is, for example, Martin Buber, who writes: "First doing and then hearing […]. Not truth as idea nor truth as shape or form but truth as deed is Judaism's task" (Buber 1967: 113).

The episode discusses a halachic dispute between a group of rabbis, on one side, and Rabbi Eliezer, on the other. The specific topic is actually irrelevant, as the focus is on how the argumentation progresses. After failing to convince the rabbis with logical arguments, Rabbi Eliezer resorts to various forms of authority to back up his view. He invokes the authority of such natural elements as a tree and a stream, artificial constructions like the walls of the study hall, and goes on in a sort of crescendo, whose climax is a divine intervention: "A Divine Voice emerged from Heaven and said: Why are you differing with Rabbi Eliezer, as the halakha is in accordance with his opinion in every place that he expresses an opinion?" (TB, *Bava Metzia*: 59b). However, none of Rabbi Eliezer's attempts is successful. The rabbis are not convinced, as they do not acknowledge authority itself as a valid argumentative tool. Even divine authority, in this context, is no exception: "We do not regard a Divine Voice – say the Rabbis – as You [i.e., God] already wrote at Mount Sinai, in the Torah: 'After a majority to incline'" (ibid: 59b).

Beyond its strong anti-authoritative message, however, another decisive point that makes this episode particularly meaningful is God's reaction to the rabbis' claim to autonomy. Contrary to what one might believe, the rabbis do not provoke God's wrath, but are rather praised for their capability for critical and independent thinking: "The Holy One, Blessed be He, smiled and said: My children have triumphed over Me; My children have triumphed over Me" (ibid: 59b). In other words, God does not see the rabbis' behavior as a form of insubordination to be punished. Their sticking to the majority rule is instead the clearest proof that they have acquired and embraced the true spirit of the divine law, which is one of comment, interpretation, discussion, and critical thinking; it certainly does not require blind obedience, and even refuses it.

The Talmudic story is a valuable representation, in narrative form, of Fromm's understanding of godlikeness. Once she has reached an adequate level of maturity, says Fromm, the human being is able to "deal with God on terms of equality" (Fromm 1966: 77), as if they were equal partners. But the factor that more than any other allows the human being to emancipate herself up to the level of godlikeness is her adherence to the divine law, whose main teachings are probably suspicion and contempt toward any form of authority, even if divine in nature, and a questioning attitude that looks at the majority for always temporary and revisable answers.

The satisfaction that God derives from his "children" achieving autonomy, moreover, confirms Fromm's theory of graduality: obedience to God, in this view, is not the final goal, but just an intermediate, necessary step toward au-

thentic freedom. Starting from the *submission to idolatry*, the Jewish human being transitions to an intermediate state of *obedience to God*, only to leave it behind when she becomes mature enough to bear the burden of freedom and reach *godlikeness*. The first transition, from idolatry to obedience to God, is necessary because of human constitutive weakness: "The human being is feeble and weak […]. She needs to be obedient to God so that she can break her fixation to the primary ties [read: idolatry]" (ibid: 77). The second transition can be considered complete when the human being acquires that "spirit of independence from, and even challenge to, God" (ibid: 79) that is epitomized in the Talmudic story.

It is easy to see how the categories that Fromm elaborates in his 1941 book correspond to those expounded in his 1966 work. In fact, in the dynamics of freedom, *four* categories can be determined: 1) a primordial condition of *submission* to natural necessity and 2) the *negative freedom from* that submission. From here, then, two paths diverge: on the one hand, 3) a *relapse* into submission and, on the other, 4) the *positive freedom to*. However, each category can be paired with its theological counterpart: in this view, 1) submission corresponds to the human proneness to *idol worship*, represented by the Jewish slavery in Egypt; 2) the philosophical notion of *freedom from* coincides with the intermediate phase of *obedience to God* that the Israelites have to experience after their liberation from Egypt.[22] Finally, 3) a *regression* to the old idolatrous mentality, as in the episode of the golden calf, or 4) an evolution toward *godlikeness*, as in the Talmudic episode from *Bava Metzia*, represent the two potential paths – backward and forward, respectively – that can develop from a still-incomplete liberation such as that indicated at point 2.

## Conclusion

It has been shown that along the path that leads to godlikeness as the human being's final goal, it is necessary to go through the intermediate stage of obedience to God. This appears to be the case because despite still being a form of submission, bowing to God's authority is an effective way to avoid other human or worldly – and therefore idolatrous – authorities. At the same time, however, it is crucial that the obedient attitude toward God remains just a transitional

22 Fromm defines the liberation from Egypt as "the central event in the Jewish tradition" (Fromm 1966: 187).

phase, destined to be overcome, as the risk subsists that God himself, in the long run, will come to be considered and treated as an idol.[23]

The following evolution of the human being – from obedience to God to godlikeness – is accompanied by a shift in emphasis from God himself to the law he provided, and this meets precisely that anti-idolatrous claim that the phase of obedience to God, intermediate as it is, cannot satisfy completely. The primacy of the law, which characterizes godlikeness as a condition of full freedom and independence, leads to an employment of critical thinking that is profoundly anti-authoritarian in nature. As the episode in *Bava Metzia* illustrates, through critical thinking, argumentation, and the democratic principle of majority rule, the human being can argue with God as an equal interlocutor; she can challenge and even contradict him. The God-given law is thus an emancipatory instrument in this view, which allows the human being to make the final evolutionary step and eventually "become like God," in Fromm's own words.

However, an objection can be raised that the risk of idolization implied in the obedience to God could very well apply to his law as well: If making an idol out of God is a real risk to be avoided through compliance with the law, what prevents the law itself from being idolized? It must be noted that Erich Fromm does not even pose this problem. However, going beyond his work, a possible answer can be found by looking at the *nature* of the divine law, at those essential traits that make it somehow immune to idolization.

One of the main traits that can be recognized in the Torah[24] is the constitutive openness of its verses, sometimes even verging on ambiguity, which puts them in constant need of *interpretation*. In her *Lire la Torah*, for example, Catherine Chalier insists on the importance of interpretation in Judaism by directly connecting it to the Jewish loathing for idolatry: "The need to interpret imposes itself on every reader because, unless we confuse it with an idol, no verse imposes a fixed and definitive meaning that it would suffice to receive" (Chalier 2014: 89, trans. BF). Arguably, if interpretation is a sort of alternative to idolatry – as Chalier presents it – then the fact that the Torah essentially requires an interpretive approach contributes to making it inherently impervious to any form of idolization.

For Chalier, a verse can be either interpreted or idolized, but on closer inspection, it is impossible to make an idol out of something that can never be

23 This risk is taken into account by such thinkers as Max Scheler (1960: 246–270) and Martin Buber (1970: 153–154). On this topic, cf. also Fortis 2023a.

24 The translation of the word "Torah" is "teaching," "law".

fully grasped. In fact, not even the literal sense of a verse can be considered clarified once and for all, and it will always require further interpretive efforts: "Such a sense [the literal one] cannot become a 'dogma' without turning into an imposture, so it must always remain open to hermeneutic plurality in order to avoid this drift" (ibid: 90, trans. BF). Stopping the process of interpretation to establish a single meaning is explicitly called "an imposture;"[25] it is tantamount to distorting what is supposed to be revealed.

Another major exponent of Jewish hermeneutics, Michael Fishbane, lays stress on the Scripture as something *living* and therefore in constant need of being accounted for through new interpretations. By distinguishing between *explicatio* and *interpretatio* as the two main modes of interpretation, Fishbane writes: "*Explicatio* is principally intent upon circumscribing the text within a specific historical horizon, whereas for *interpretatio* the horizon of the text is not temporally fixed, and it is read as a living document" (Fishbane 2009: 353).[26] Both *explicatio* and *interpretatio* are necessary components of a culture which, like Judaism, is based on texts but nonetheless a certain primacy has to be granted to *interpretatio*, as it is the main means through which a textual culture can adapt to different times and thus survive through the ages. Moreover, the transformations at the level of *interpretatio* quite frequently affect and mold the level of *explicatio*,[27] thus confirming the order of priority between them.

Fishbane describes *interpretatio* in Jewish hermeneutics as a two-pole activity. Only the first pole is fixed, in his view, while the second is movable and changes over time: "The eternity and centrality of the divine word [encounters] the necessary mutability of its reception and filtering. […] The divine voice, while unique and authoritative, is always an unstable and changing voice filtered diversely in the human community." (ibid: 358) The mutability of *interpretatio* is thus a constitutive factor in the Jewish approach to the divine law,

25 "Meanings are therefore plural, and they do not cancel each other out" (Chalier 2014: 90, trans. BF).

26 Fishbane also adds: "In brief, the process of *explicatio* tends to lock a text into one historical period. […] In contrast, *interpretatio* delivers the text from its original historical context, treating its linguistic content as powerfully multivalent and so, in principle, resistant to reductive or final readings – while treating its own work of interpretation as a fundamental moment in the creative life of the text" (Fishbane 2009: 354).

27 "It can be said that text-cultures are such primarily because of the *interpretatio* that animates them and which, aside from the meanest paraphrase or linguistic annotation, quickly conquers *explicatio* and transforms it into its own image. This is true especially of religious text-cultures and of Judaism in particular" (Fishbane 2009: 353).

which, despite its divine and immutable origin, needs continuous recontextualization on the side of its human reception. However, the main point here is that a variable reception of the law acts in an anti-idolatrous way, as it nips in the bud any possible idolization of the Torah.

The continuous activity of interpreting, with its always new nuances of meaning and its various layers,[28] keeps the law in a state of unfixedness that undermines the very condition of idolatry. In fact, in order to indulge the human need for certainty – that is, the main reason why the human being resorts to idol worship – the idol must be something stable. More than any other feature, an idol must display stability, fixity, for the human being to be able to grasp it – be it with her gaze or with her thought.[29] But this very determinateness and consequent graspability cannot be ascribed to a law whose meaning is constantly put into question, discussed, challenged, and reshaped in the ongoing process of interpretation it essentially requires. Bearing an irreducible core of indeterminateness that makes interpretation necessary and inexhaustible, the Jewish law resists any idolizing tendency. In this sense, it can be rightly considered the way out of the burden of idolatry and toward the goal of "being like God."

Finally, with Fromm, but now even beyond him, it is possible to conclude that the creativity[30] of an endless interpretation and the exercise of critical thinking that this demands pave the way toward the positive freedom that characterizes godlikeness. This represents the highest realization of the human being: a state of full maturity that is definitively beyond any need for idolatry – be it in literal or metaphorical form.

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28 In chapter 3, Chalier refers to the four traditional hermeneutic approaches, that is: 1) *peshat* (פְּשָׁט), which indicates the literal and direct meaning; 2) *remez* (רֶמֶז), which stands for the deep meaning beyond the literal sense; 3) *derash* (דְּרַשׁ), the comparative meaning obtained through similar occurrences; and finally 4) *sod* (סוֹד), the level of secret meaning that can be reached through inspiration or revelation. Cf. Chalier 2014: 89–90.

29 Differences and relationships between material, visual idols, and idols of thought is dealt with in Fortis 2023b.

30 "The traditional hermeneutics of Jewish *interpretatio* […] is the creative retrieval of meaningfulness in terms of, and, indeed, in the terms of, its sources" (Fishbane 2009: 357).

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