HYSTERIC DISCOURSE AND ETHICS IN TEACHING

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> Yes, finally we really think about shuffling the cards, changing the way we present the mathematics to primary school a bit, that mathematics is so beautiful, but with our school programs or structure, I don't know, we really risk making it a bore, a repetitive, intricate, continuous exercise.

These are the words of Lisa [1], a primary school teacher, who clearly highlights the contradictions in which mathematics teachers work in these complex and uncertain days. In this article we focus on the discourse of such primary school teachers about mathematics, with the aim of bringing out the distance between teachers' needs given by the socio-cultural context and the opportunities provided by educational institutions. We will analyse their discourses—using in particular Lacan's *hysteric discourse*—to highlight how they talk about this distance, and how it opens a dimension of possible ethical questioning about mathematics teaching.

Lacan was a French psychoanalyst who re-thought some Freudian ideas and whose ideas have been adapted by Brown (2020) to mathematics education. Brown's reworking of Lacanian theory starts from recognising that the meaning of mathematics education for everyone cannot be reduced to mere marketability in the world of work. Without denying the need for present and future professional figures with very high mathematical skills (experts in data analysis, artificial intelligence, mechatronics or robotics, *etc.*), mathematics education could "work more generally at the human/mathematics interface in terms of more widespread participation but where the terms of that participation are left open as part of the pedagogic encounter" (p. ix).

This shift toward widespread participation as the opening of a pedagogic encounter, for Brown, is the result of a shift in perspective on the nature of mathematics as a culturally constituted body of knowledge. In particular, the researcher critiques the anachronism of the positivist view of mathematics, oriented toward 'truth' and 'correctness', that is still widespread today, especially within school curricula.

> Mathematics is considered by many as a discipline beyond social discourses. Underlying this understanding is a philosophical position that seems to assert the objectivity of mathematics as a prized possession. This kind of grounding has the effect of conceptualising mathematics as constituted by pre-existing patterns that are stable and can be discovered. In this view, it is possible to know what is true and what is not true since knowledge is objective and universal. (p. 2)

This view of mathematics is the basis of an approach to mathematics education denoted by a lack of choice in doing mathematics (particularly pervasive especially in the early years of mathematics education in many countries). In this approach, what matters is making truth and correctness—hinged within a capitalist and neo-capitalist economic-social system—more and more 'performant', and thus the possibility of making mistakes loses space (and acquires a negative connotation). However, the role of error—and thus, of choice—is fundamental in mathematics education: many studies show how making mistakes is one of the fundamental aspects of doing mathematical and one of the most productive ones in terms of mathematical teaching-learning (see *e.g.,* Borasi, 1996; Mellone, Ribeiro, Jakobsen, Carotenuto, Romano & Pacelli, 2020).

Radford (2021) underlines that the choice dimension is exactly what gives space to ethics in mathematics. He describes the question of 'correctness' as a space where mathematics itself is used as an instrument to exercise constituted power. Establishing a solution that is 'more correct than others' among the possible ones by those who hold knowledge (*e.g.,* teachers), establishes a power structure with respect to those who do not (*e.g.,* students).

This 'positivist' view of mathematics and its related goals of mathematics education, however, have been challenged by many studies. Several researchers have shown that mathematics is not 'neutral' culturally (*e.g.,* Bishop, 1991; Barton, 2008), but is a socio-cultural product. Mellone and colleagues (2020) argue that mathematics and mathematics education practices develop embedding a culturally determined set of customs, beliefs and values. Other researchers have also pointed out that Western-style mathematics is not necessarily ethical from a socio-cultural (*e.g.,* D'Ambrosio, 2006) or socio-political (*e.g.,* Skovsmose, 1994) point of view. However, there is an interesting issue to consider: the aforementioned studies are based on an idea of the subject as a unitary structure. This idea has been questioned by Brown (2011, 2020) starting from Lacanian psychoanalytical perspective and Badiou's (2013/2018) subsequent interpretation. From this perspective there is no longer a 'unified' subject capable of 'objectifying' mathematics. The subject splits and necessarily becomes conditioned by language and culture in which it is embedded at the moment of birth; it is the culture—the 'Other', in Lacanian terms—which is able to provide already established meanings. Mathematical objects are no longer ontological or even 'conceptual' objects, but become discursive objects, and thus can be continuously negotiated within the discourses participated by the

individual (see the example in Brown, 2011, about the lack of words indicating geometrical shapes in Runyankore language, p. 10). Also conceptualisation, in this viewpoint, can be seen as a product of the cultural way through which we construct discourses in mathematics. The ethical problem—in this context where there is no longer a 'unified' subject as the guarantor of a structure, and where the individual must necessarily come to terms with its socio-cultural-political situatedness—is further exacerbated.

Teachers' education

The 'unraveling' of the positivist vision of mathematics and of the subject as 'unitary' is espoused and used by Brown (2020) to study the problem of teacher education in the English cultural context. Brown highlights as critical aspects of the English education system the tendency towards the standardisation of learning assessment tests and classroom teaching activities, precisely to the detriment of the development of teachers' critical thinking. To do this, he refers to Lacan's vision of subjectivity and applies Lacan's *four discourses* as an analytical tool, in a perspective of ethical analysis aimed at deconstructing the system of standardisation and the deprivation of teachers' critical thinking.

We can characterise Lacan's four discourses as follows (Ramploud, 2022):

- *university discourse,* which includes the aspects related to knowledge developed within a given academic culture;
- *mastery discourse* that is articulated starting from socio-political governmental choices affecting, in particular, the school systems;
- *hysteric discourse* is the one that the subject utters when his/her own beliefs clash with the theoretical and socio-political dimensions;
- *analytic discourse* when finally, in a psycho-analytical perspective, the subject is able to produce a critical effort on the other discourses and specifically on *mastery discourse*.

Here we will focus on teachers' *hysteric discourse*. The word 'hysteric' recalls images of irrationality, emotionality, resistance and critique; we refer to the meaning of 'friction', 'resistance' used by Lacan.

We highlight the 'hysteric dimension' of the Italian school system, while trying at the same time to offer an ethical reading of teachers' educational needs, in a similar way to Brown's work in the English context. We observe the aspects of primary teachers' discourses that refer to one or more of the four discourses. The parts of the discourse referring primarily to theoretical and academic aspects of mathematics education will be classified as *university discourse.* The parts more directly referring to normative and institutional aspects (such as *e.g.* standardised tests, curriculum, *etc.*) will be considered as pertaining to *mastery discourse.* Parts where the interviewees express dynamics of friction, resistance, or on the contrary uncritical acceptance of a contradiction they perceive between socio-cultural context and normative directions will be classified as *hysteric discourse.* Finally, the parts where there is a critical effort to 'patch up' this tear between institutional and contextual dimensions will be considered as pertaining to *analytic discourse.*

The Italian context

While Brown is confronted with a strong policymaker, who imposes a well-defined vision of mathematics and of mathematics teaching to be pursued, in Italy policy is a 'weak' element: it promotes long-term guidelines oriented to competency goals expressed only for the end of different school levels (childhood, primary, lower secondary, upper secondary school), and it does not give specific indications of objectives and teaching methods to be implemented in daily teaching.

In Italy, the general cultural context and, in particular, school culture, are still affected by the historical events that characterised school reform dating back to the first half of the twentieth century. A legacy of the end of the fascist dictatorship is that freedom of teaching is a fundamental right, which has been enshrined in the Italian Constitution since 1948. This freedom is inviolable in the Constitution because the authors intended to defend teaching from authoritarian deviations from democracy (Ramploud, Funghi & Mellone, 2022). Consistently with the regional autonomies enshrined in the Constitution, a path of school autonomy, also of individual educational institutions, was then further developed, guaranteeing the possibility for each context to build its own educational offerings within the broad context of the Italian National Guidelines (ING). These elements have contributed to make both the evaluation of teachers and of individual school institutions very difficult, due to the extreme inhomogeneity of different situations. In this perspective, there still emerges today a certain precariousness of national learning evaluation systems and a tendency toward the complexity of identifying elements common to the various school contexts.

In Lacan's perspective, we can observe how even in cultural contexts without prescriptive policy directions, teachers are still placed in a normed space (*e.g.,* ING, individual educational institution directions, *etc*. as *mastery discourse*) espousing a certain educational philosophy *(i.e.,* a certain kind of knowledge, *university discourse*). However, because of the way *mastery discourse* is constituted (Brown, 2020), the policymaker's discourse can never fully reflect all the implications of the espoused educational philosophy, which thus remain open to the interpretation of those implementing it.

Moreover, the less prescriptive nature of policy also implicitly devolves to teachers the responsibility of choosing how to handle the short-term and medium-term aspects of instructional design. In this perspective, teachers cannot but take on the role of political and ethical decision-makers within the shorter-term didactics in their classrooms, finding themselves 'alone' managing aspects of the espoused *university discourse* not explicated in *mastery discourse*. Nevertheless, teachers do not always have the awareness and/or willingness to take responsibility for this choice.

How teachers react to a provocative sentence

We chose to raise 'hysterisms' in primary school teachers, that is, reflections that would highlight this divided subject (the teacher) when confronted with the ING (*mastery discourse*) on processes that are potentially very significant for

developing competencies in mathematics, but that are left 'in the background' with respect to other contents in the normative text. Our choice to raise 'hysterisms' was due to our specific interest in understanding how different teachers are dealing with their hysteric dimension. Our intentional focus on *hysteric discourse* was precisely to bring out its possible different nuances, to detect elements useful for us to understand how to design teacher professional development courses allowing a construction of possible *analytic discourses*.

We have chosen to consider two significant processes within primary school: estimation and proportional thinking. In fact, these can be difficult to manage for teachers focusing more on students' correct/incorrect answers than on students' reasoning processes. They could find difficulty in exploiting students' mistakes and creating the conditions for students' decision making. Estimation processes are difficult to categorise *a priori* as 'correct/incorrect' since *a priori* there is not an estimation 'more correct' than another one. Regarding proportional thinking, there is research pointing out students' difficulties in this topic (*e.g.,* Lo & Watanabe, 1997). Nevertheless, the development of proportional thinking prerequisites in primary school—such as the difference between multiplicative relationships and additive relationship present within proportionality situations—is fundamental to all later mathematics and in general science learning (*e.g.,* Simon & Placa, 2012). Although the importance of estimation processes and of proportional thinking is recalled in ING for primary school, teachers are usually not aware of the results of scientific research on these topics. Generally primary teachers may prefer to avoid dealing with problematic situations on these topics in class, since they recognise students' difficulties in exploring such situations, and in producing 'correct' answers.

For this reason, we proposed a sentence by a teacher, Marta, highlighting the importance of estimation and proportional reasonings within primary school mathematics education.

> "In my opinion in primary school we should work on estimation and proportional thinking, because these are two of the most 'concrete' aspects of mathematics that exist and are hardly ever done in school. For the rest there are the tools." What do you think? Do you agree or disagree with this teacher?

We used this sentence as provocation, because it challenges the curriculum and established teaching practices in Italian primary school, to bring out and analyse the potential *hysteric discourse* in some primary school teachers who attended mathematics teacher education courses held by our research groups.

This request for reflection was sent by private mobile message to eleven primary school teachers, with different levels of seniority, to gather their reactions. They were asked to respond by sending one or more voice recordings. In a Lacanian perspective autobiographical discourse takes on a particularly important role (Ramploud, 2022). We chose to analyse qualitatively the transcripts of the collected interviews using Lacan's four discourses, to make the ethical dimension behind teachers' deontologically 'grounded' choices to come to the fore.

Teachers' perspectives

Different difficulties emerged from the teachers' answers to the provocation embedded in Marta's sentence. Out of eleven teachers, the majority (seven) provided an answer where a *hysteric discourse* emerged regarding the gap between the lack of direct reference to work on estimation processes and proportional thinking in the ING and the necessity to work on them in primary school. In the following we discuss the different aspects these seven answers allow us to highlight.

We consider first Lisa's response, already quoted at the beginning of this article. The *hysteric discourse* is evident when Lisa directly connects the "bore", the "repetitive, intricate […] exercise" to the *mastery discourse* ("our school programs or structure") that she opposes to her conception of a mathematics that is "so beautiful" [2]. Marta's sentence constitutes for Lisa an occasion to put *university discourse* and *mastery discourse* under tension, opening a significant space of reflection. Lisa's claim goes toward the possibility of activating teachers' critical processes to open up less conventional ways of understanding mathematics, less bound to the correct/wrong dichotomy. Lisa's distinction between a mathematics that is "a bore" and another one being "beautiful" seems to correspond to a distinction between *procedural* and *relational* mathematics (Skemp, 1976). Assonances also appear in the discourse of another teacher, Barbara:

> Intuitively, I would think that the tools [that Marta is referring to in her sentence] are, I don't know, the four operations […] in short that it is the traditional mathematics, that maybe asks us precisely to be able to apply a formula, an algorithm and then you solve it. Kind of, like, there were two mathematics, right? It's like you don't do the one that instead makes you reason.

Barbara says that there is a kind of bipolarism consisting even of "two mathematics": a "traditional mathematics, that maybe asks us precisely to know how to apply a formula, an algorithm, and then you solve it", and one "that instead makes you reason".

In the following excerpt, Mary's *hysteric discourse* somewhat echoes the distinction proposed by Barbara, but falls into the specific context of estimation problems.

> I agree when she says that [estimation problems] are done very little, because we usually start right away working with the number understood as a digit instead of working on quantities, I think that when this teacher talks about estimation she is actually referring to this very thing, I mean, no work is done with respect to what it means to count, how I count, what I count, in my opinion there is a whole work there on estimation, which thus is closely related to measuring, how I measure quantities, how I discretise them.

The shift that Mary suggests from number "as a digit" to number as a quantity/measure allows one to rethink these kinds of problems from a different perspective, much less oriented toward identifying unambiguous answers in exercises that do not allow for the exploration of pluralities of solutions and solution processes.

Elena focuses more on teachers' difficulties in handling the complexity of proportional thinking:

> Actually, especially proportional thinking is really dealt with at a superficial level, it is reduced in both primary and secondary school to solving proportions that are often not related to problems or situations.

She emphasises that teachers' attention to proportional thinking often concerns exclusively formal and procedural tools, that are introduced with a 'top-down' approach without having developed the meaning of proportional thinking from meaningful problem situations for students. In our view, this answer highlights a gap between the *mastery discourse*, on one hand, and the *university discourse* grounding the *mastery discourse,* on the other hand. In fact, proportional thinking is explicitly indicated exclusively in the ING for secondary school, and no prerequisites are explicitly stated in the earlier school grades. Nevertheless, as we have seen, studies in international and Italian literature (*e.g.,* Mellone, Ramploud & Carotenuto, 2021) support the promotion of activities on proportional thinking, where proportion is not introduced from a formal point of view, as early as primary school and preschool. As we see from the excerpt below, from Iride's response, such a gap sometimes can be interpreted by teachers as a signal that the level of difficulty of proportional thinking is not adequate for pre- and primary school.

> What we detect [from the results of Transalpine Mathematical Rally [3] tests] is that children very often resort to additive strategies, I mean, they are inclined to add or subtract rather than to apply a proportion [...] this makes us understand that applying a correct strategy with respect to proportionality is an idea that the child does not have [...] I would say that in primary school we have to deal with all those aspects [...] and so probably, surely [a teacher can] prepare the ground […] —but maybe it is a bit premature, even if maybe there are also very adequate ways—for the lower secondary school, in order to make children able to understand and operate with the concept of proportionality afterwards. [...] So certainly there are possible activities to start working on this idea of proportionality [in primary school], however, I cannot say to develop a concept of proportionality.

In Iride's words, a teaching problem emerges, namely, that a problem is adequate for students if they are able to solve it correctly (*i.e.,* in a manner consistent with her vision of formal mathematics). In this, one can see a kind of, shall we say, 'Piagetian' view of learning that is associated with a reading 'not between the lines' of the ING, as well as a misunderstanding of standardised tests such as the Transalpine Mathematical Rally. Iride's discourse suggests a perspective of students' error avoidance; in research in mathematics education, instead, it is precisely because of the complexity of proportional thinking that we should begin working on it as early as possible. Furthermore, from her words emerges the belief that additive strategies in a proportional context are always incorrect, when there may be some additive strategies that correctly solve problems of proportionality. So Iride also moves in the ethical space described by Radford (2021) in which a solution is 'more correct than others', establishing a very dangerous power structure.

The last sentence highlights a *hysteric discourse* in which Iride fails to reconnect a work on proportional thinking ("idea of proportionality"), preparatory to the introduction of proportion as a formal object, to the development of the "concept of proportionality".

A slightly different view of this gap between *university discourse* and *mastery discourse* emerges in the next excerpt, where Adriana's split between what teachers do and what teachers should do is particularly significant:

> Concerning proportional thinking, actually (apart from the problems we usually find in the INVALSI [4] tests, so we bump up against it when we do the tests) [...] it is always considered too complex, too difficult, and so teachers say "Okay well, but this is stuff they'll deal with later in lower secondary school anyway" and they hardly work on it. Actually maybe it shouldn't be like that, we should start even from a younger age to work on these aspects as well; however, I think they involve several students' objective difficulties related to division, fraction, I mean, related to all those mathematical aspects […] that one has to deal with when talking about proportion, which frighten us a little bit and so one doesn't put much thought into it.

It is noteworthy how there is initially a co-presence of *university discourse* (reference to learning difficulties about divisions, fractions, *etc*.) and *mastery discourse* (reference to INVALSI tests), due to an acknowledgement of the two discourses as part of a mathematics education trajectory and activity design. At the same time, the lack of explicit mention in the ING for primary school of prerequisites to proportional thinking allows Adriana, like Iride, to derogate the development of proportionality to secondary school. Particularly interesting is the emphasis on the "fright" generating a real *hysteric discourse*, making Adriana choose not to face the complexity that proportional thinking seems to bring with it.

Finally, we report an excerpt highlighting that there are also teachers who, in a critical way, recognise instead the importance of adequately developing processes such as estimation and proportional thinking through meaningful activities for children from the very beginning of primary school. Alberto, a retired teacher, replied:

> I agree that in primary school it is important to work on estimation and proportional thinking, and that this is done too little. However, I have some concerns. First, one should ask how one works on these aspects: how one works is not indifferent. And secondly, in order to work in a meaningful way it seems to me that there is a need for number sense to be built up through a multiplicity of experiences, including especially concrete ones and especially in the early years of elementary school. I mean to say that it seems to me to be dangerous to separate aspects of mathematics in primary school from the complex of mathematical work done in the classroom. I would see mathematics teaching in primary school as an integrated process of experiences

that are collectively reflected upon to build and share knowledge. So it seems to me a bit risky to separate these aspects.

We can notice in Alberto's discourse a particular consistency with the studies mentioned earlier, that suggest working on the prerequisites of proportional thinking as early as primary school. Such a perspective, which starts from a *hysteric discourse* and moves toward a more a*nalytic discourse,* allows for more illumination of the possible trajectories of teacher education we already hypothesised in reference to Lisa's answer.

Reflections

To conclude this article, we would like to underline that we are aware of critical readings of Lacan by other authors, emphasising the problematic and underlying oppositions subject-object and subject-culture that we find in the humanist tradition that Lacan failed to get rid of. For example, according to Badiou (1999), the subject-object relationship should be completely re-organised. Re-thinking Platonic thought, the subject is understood as "a finite moment of the generic procedure" (p. 31); the "central concept is that of the objectless subject, itself the consequence of genericity as the faithful becoming, in itself, of an event supplementing it" (p. 96). An author that proceeds in this direction is Žižek (2012), who provides a new interpretation of Lacan, offering a Hegelian-Marxist view of praxis that could be very helpful in envisioning changes in teacher education.

Here we chose not to solve this issue, but on the contrary to exploit it, to use Lacan's four discourses for emphasising the different ways in which teachers describe the existing distance between their contextual needs and the instances provided by educational institutions. From this perspective, the shift from discourse to praxis certainly remains an issue to be explored through further studies, focusing more specifically on the subject-object/subject-culture oppositions.

All the analysed excerpts showed the presence of *hysteric discourse*, as we were expecting (in this respect, the choice of the provocative sentence as a stimulus to raise 'hysterisms' was effective). Indeed, we can see that, from one side, teachers recognise the centrality of estimation and proportional reasoning as mathematical skills, from the other side, they also show difficulties in foreseeing educational trajectories enabling students to build these important mathematical skills from primary school. We also found, in particular, how the different 'hysterisms' could refer to different aspects of the disconnection between school reality perceived by individual respondents and institutional directions. For example, we saw how for Adriana the focus is mainly on teachers' choices in her experience in relation to specific mathematical contents and their epistemological difficulties, while Iride emphasises more what children are able to do in primary school. Only in Alberto's excerpt we saw that this *hysteric discourse* can further develop into an *analytic discourse.* In the perspective of Brown's cited analyses, then, it might be interesting to favor situations supporting this development:

> One goes into analysis with the intention of discovering the unconscious forces that interfere with conscious actions or the gap between them. […] The analyst addresses the subject with a view to identifying the master discourses working through them. Through this process a master discourse can be revolutionalised, turned over, as the analytic resolution works itself through. […] The analyst address is underpinned by systematic knowledge, which is ultimately referenced to new coordinates (Brown, 2020, p. 43)

In this perspective, *analytic discourse* arises from *hysteric discourse* in relation to the gap between unconscious and conscious forces acted by *mastery discourse,* but it differs from *hysteric discourse* because in the analytic one there are 'new coordinates' helpful for rereading the *mastery discourse* and *university discourse,* and for finding a new way of handling their complexity. The search for these 'new coordinates' is somehow envisaged by Alberto, who appears to be the only one among the interviewees to have identified—albeit in a seminal form and not entirely free of hysterical traits—a possible constructive way of dialoguing with the need to work on proportional thinking as early as primary school.

This study suggests that it could be important to make teachers aware that *mastery discourse* does not explicate the complexity of *university discourse* on which it grounds, providing them the opportunity to deal with these 'hidden' aspects. For instance, *hysteric discourses* similar to those revealed in the previous excerpts could be raised for other important processes in mathematics—such as the development of problem-solving skills or argumentative skills. In fact, the ING talk about these processes and stress their importance, but do not relate them to a specific and explicit *university discourse,* neither do they give an articulated or detailed perspective on such a discourse. So, it would be important to rethink teacher education from this perspective, particularly because teachers may interpret these 'hidden' aspects of the normative text as aspects they do not (necessarily) have to deal with, thus keeping *hysteric discourses* in place. In this direction it could be important that mathematics teacher education courses empower teachers to develop their *hysteric discourses* into *analytic discourses.* Such education courses could be oriented to a work on teachers' decision-making processes that are necessarily involved within the process of constructing such *analytic discourses.* These reflections highlight that Lacan's four discourses could be useful to design mathematics teacher education courses, since they point out the importance of supporting teachers to take responsibility for exercising critical thinking about the normative text, reflecting on the non-explicit aspects, and taking critical decisions on these aspects in their teaching practice (see also Rampoud *et al.,* 2022).

Acknowledgements

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Notes

[1] A pseudonym, as are all the teacher's names in this article.

[2] From Lisa's words we can guess that she understands the term 'beautiful' ['bella' in Italian] as a synonym of 'interesting', 'engaging', and she is not referring to anything aesthetic.

[3] From the official website http://armtint.eu: "The Transalpine Mathematical Rally is a mathematical competition between classes, from the third grade to the seventh grade, in the area of mathematical problem solving,

and takes place in Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg and Switzerland. It is organised by the Association Transalpine Mathematical Rally, [...], whose bylaws state, among other things: the Association Transalpine Mathematical Rally is a cultural association whose objective is to promote problem solving to improve the learning and teaching of mathematics by means of a comparison between classes. [...]" (our translation). More information can be found at the website.

[4] This institute designs and organises the national evaluation tests for the Italian school system. See https://www.invalsi.it/.

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Communications

'To Have or to Be' in mathematics education

CHRISTOPH ABLEITINGER

Erich Fromm wrote the book 'To Have or To Be' in 1976 as a socially critical work and it quickly became a bestseller. Its critique of consumption and capitalism is more relevant today than ever, precisely because of the painful awareness that the earth's resources are dwindling. In his work, Fromm explains how the pursuit of possessions, which has dominated Western culture for decades, leads to competition, greed, power relations, fear of losing possessions and ultimately to a society of notoriously unhappy people. He calls this the *mode of having*. Fromm contrasts this with the *mode of being,* in which possession does not play a decisive role. He refers to many philosophical and religious approaches that also propagate this attitude as life-enhancing and psychologically and emotionally healthy.

Fromm first explains this using the example of material possessions. He criticizes the throwaway mentality of Western society, the uncontrolled pursuit of private property and power. In our society, the identity of individuals is not determined by what they *are*, but by what they *have*. He does not demonize possession *per se,* but contrasts the *mode of having* with an attitude that, for example, focuses on maintaining existing possessions and is characterized, among other things, by a productive inner activity in which the use of one's own abilities and talents is central.

The difference between the *mode of having* and the *mode of being* is then discussed more broadly and also applied to other societal areas. Using the example of knowledge, the *mode of having* means acquiring as much knowledge as possible in order to pass an exam, for example. Conversely, the *mode of being* is about productive listening, about genuine interest in the subject. But more on that later. The difference between these two attitudes can also be seen in seemingly banal situations, for example when handling a beautiful flower. While picking the flower, taking it home and putting it in the vase, puts 'taking possession' in the foreground, *i.e. having,* the attitude of *being* means merely looking at it, enjoying it and being aware that other passers-by can also enjoy the flower if you do not pick it.

Fromm pleads for a radical humanism that really puts the human being at the center. For example, work should serve the true fulfillment of human needs and not industry and the economy as a capitalist end in itself. Society should be characterized by solidarity, reasonable consumption, cooperation with nature and the pursuit of human well-being. Personal relationships and inner fulfillment are more important than owning things. He makes suggestions for such a transformation, which ultimately has to begin with changing the inner attitude of the individual.

Personal preface

This book made a deep impression on me and I could not help but think about what this means for learning and